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THE VORTEX



THOMAS McKEAN





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"For ye were as sheep going astray"

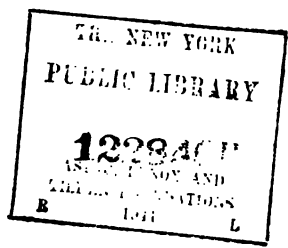
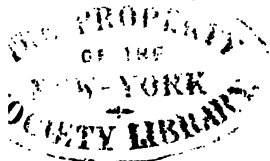
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I DEDICATE
THIS STORY TO
MY WIFE
WITH MUCH
LOVE

THE VORTEX

I

ANNA TREFUSIS opened the French window of her sitting-room and stepped out softly into the night. A moment of indecision, then she turned instinctively towards the low balustrade which marked the line of separation between the terrace on which she stood and the shady garden below. Seating herself on a bench she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the unresponsive stone and gazed in silence over the moon-kissed waters of the Lake of Como.

In the half light she seemed a dream woman, a creature of her absorbing thoughts. Her frock of gray *crêpe de chine* served to heighten the effect of unreality, while her white skin in the silver glow, surmounted by a mass of Titian-red hair, gleamed in the silence of the night.

Her face lost something of its intensity as a reminiscent smile hovered gently about her mobile mouth. The subtle happiness of days

that were past and gone possessed her and held her a prisoner in a loving grasp ; then her mood changed and she sighed. Were the hours only golden before marriage, and was it always the man who first lost interest ? " Love is to a man a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence."

No children having been born of their union, Paul Trefusis, bitterly disappointed, threw himself as a solace into his painting with renewed energy. At that time a mere amateur, by dint of hard work he made rapid strides in his chosen profession, until Fate willed that one of his portraits should be accepted by the Academy, and worse, from Anna's point of view, "hung on the line." Paul was in the seventh heaven of delight, but she, though secretly proud of his talent, could not but feel that it was on this rock their ship had struck, and was about to founder with its precious burden of love ; yet it did nothing, nothing of its own volition, bobbing about helplessly on a limitless sea. How long would the survivors be able to withstand the buffetings of the angry waves and how much of the cargo would be saved ? She bent all her energies to the rescue of this crippled wreck, and, single-handed, tried to bind together its scattered timbers, for the husband was bliss-



fully unconscious of any disaster. God grant that no hidden reef should make her task more difficult, or bring, perforce, her labors to an end !

Possessing an artistic temperament, it was a tremendous solace for her to indulge her talent for music ; while playing on her piano, passion made her momentarily forget her troubles. Often she wandered on, improvising as her mood listed, dancing gayly in major keys or dreaming idly in minor cadences, but she had another, stronger resource, and that was her religion. She was a Protestant, and, in the early days of their married life, before they began to live abroad, her husband always accompanied her to church, in the dear old far-off home in Connecticut, but he had gradually given up the practice, and she now went alone—only to pray for aid and peace the more earnestly.

It was an ideal night. Myriads of stars nestled in the silent bosom of the waters, and shivered as a passing boat disturbed the serenity of the surface. From time to time, a few stray clouds passed over the moon's face, while in the distance the lights of Cadenabbia shone out, giving an idea of greater nearness in the night's mysterious light. A group of men passed, singing some plaintive

song, the chords now swelling in triumph and again dying away mournfully ; but still Anna remained motionless, in silent communion with her thoughts.

A light mist arose on the face of the lake, and Mrs. Trefusis drew her wrap a little closer about her shoulders. It was done unconsciously, for her mind was not in the present, and she scarcely seemed aware of her action.

The rising clouds of vapor assumed the most fantastic shapes : a woman in trailing robes passed soaring upwards, but was soon absorbed in the silver glory of the moon ; many figures followed, some with sombrero and drooping plume, others indeterminate and shadowy in the path of light. Suddenly her attention was arrested, for one of the shapes, with its face a little in shadow, she recognized as that of her husband. She shivered and involuntarily shrank back, covering her face with her hands. Her first thought was, had anything happened to Paul? Could it be an omen of disaster—a premonition of coming trouble? The body of the apparition was indistinct like the rest, but though like the others it rose, there was this remarkable difference, that the face remained clear and easily distinguishable. This particular one, too, did not dissolve, but once in the flare of light, remained

stationary. Anna looked timidly through her fingers, and, taking courage, withdrew her hands and gazed long at the still form. "Paul," she murmured at last, but the rapt expression of the face did not change; the eyes were looking heavenwards, and a great peace shrouded his strong countenance, such as Anna had never seen it wear before. Even as she watched, the features relaxed, the lines about the mouth deepened, and the eyes seemed veiled by the shadow of sadness; then the glow faded and the face of her husband became less clearly defined. What did it mean—perhaps she was going mad? Among the whirling throng of dream-shapes she did not have a moment to answer this question, for another form rose only to remain motionless beside that of her husband, and she seemed to be fascinated, unable to move. The second wraith remained in shadow, until a strange thing happened; as the light faded from her husband's face, it was absorbed by the second one, which she recognized with a start as that of Hillary Neville. What memories this presence evolved out of a past she had long thought buried! She could fancy she heard the words of love of that ardent courtship, which had first aroused a momentary interest, being repeated, but it seemed so

long ago—a ghostly echo of days that were dead.

She did not intend or wish to be dishonorable to her husband, for she had always tried to excuse his faults and condone his shortcomings without any thought of hardness, but now, with the face of Hillary, whose existence she had almost forgotten, looking down on her with the same wistful, pleading expression, she yielded to the old fascination, basking for an instant in the memory of a love killed by her own act, and blushed as she realized that such thoughts were both weak and guilty.

The snow-clad mountains shone resplendent in the moonlight and Anna turned her attention to their dizzy heights, to shut out for a time the images which worked so strongly on her imagination. As her eyes wandered once more in their direction she noticed that each face maintained an equal degree of illumination and she wondered why this should be. Before long she found out the reason—that as she dwelt the more on one, that one straight-way showed more plainly. Was she unconsciously weighing them in the balance? Should it be decreed by Fate that after fifteen years of waiting she was to be lured in the direction of another, whose memory she must not cherish, whose fatal influence she dared not allow

herself to feel? Roses live and have their day, their petals shrivel and drop off one by one. Her love, if it had ever existed for Hilary, was like one of these tender flowers; and was it not also dead and gone?

A question without an answer. How long would it be before she could regain the love of her husband, and would her patience be strong enough to wait for the moment of success! With encouragement, she hoped she could endure, but felt herself human, and therefore frail; let Paul, if he cared, look to it that she be saved from herself before it was too late.

For the last six years they had been coming to Bellagio and lived for about two months in a villa near the Hotel Grande Bretagne, taking their meals in the hotel. A sturdy peasant woman prepared their morning coffee and attended to their simple needs. It had all been very pleasant and peaceful for Paul, as he found every opportunity to work at his profession, but for her so lonely, so different from what it might have been if only,—and she sighed.

Tears were very near the surface at this point, but she controlled herself by an effort, as she felt that she could never face her husband with red eyes, for like all men who are

apparently indifferent, he had an unpleasant way of noticing details, and moreover making an unnecessary ado over them.

As the moon shone forth once more, out of a cloudless sky, she found herself looking a second time into the faces of the two men, and that unpleasant mental struggle of which she had been so much ashamed began again. She gazed at the dream-vision of her husband, and thought she detected therein a change, one which she could not clearly decipher, but which caused her heart to beat strangely ; then she looked into Hillary's countenance, melting with love and tenderness for her, and was troubled. Was it to be after all a struggle between these two ?

She tried to tell herself the whole thing was ridiculous,—that there never was nor could be any rivalry ; and yet there were the compelling eyes of Neville looking down at her, asking that heaven be opened to him, and what could she do, how could she decide ? She knew it was wrong to feel thus about it, terrible that she must concede, even to herself, that there was a question to be settled after all these years. Supposing it were so, had she not noticed that the power of seeing the face she wished belonged to her ?

Concentrating all her attention upon the

semblance of her husband, she continued to look at him fixedly. She fancied that the crisis had come, and as she willed so would Fate decree. After what seemed a long period of time, she glanced again towards the filmy shade of Hillary Neville, but to her surprise it had faded and she was left alone and face to face with Paul. It was true then,—it was in her power to bring the affair to pass. How her heart bounded as she was convinced of this. He would come back to her if she wished it and did not lose heart. As this thought took root, she smiled triumphantly at her husband's image, as if the matter were already settled, and he, his expression softened as she remembered it long ago, smiled back in glad response.

II

THE Villa Tofana was admirably suited to the needs of an artist, having a large room with good light at the top of the two-story building ; here it was that Paul could work undisturbed, with the feeling of satisfaction that conditions were favorable to good results. The floor below consisted of several dwelling apartments, with a dining-room—which was, however, not used, as their morning coffee was taken on the terrace where the hot sun did not shine in the morning hours—and a sitting-room where Anna's piano stood. The studio was reached by a little path leading up from the flagged terrace, for the villa stood on the side of the hill. Anna often wondered how many steps she had taken on this self-same terrace, with its vine-covered pergola heavy with the scent of roses and sweet olive blossoms, steps tempered by various emotions. She did not, however, seek to analyze her feelings, but attempted rather to remember the bright spots, the oases in the desert of her daily existence.

It was ten o'clock on a certain morning near the end of May that Paul sat busily at work,

painting in some of the picturesque background of his picture of "Spring," hoping to finish it in time for next year's Royal Academy, which seemed at present rather doubtful, as he had not yet found a satisfactory model for the chief figure. The picture was to be a graceful one, representing a group of five women, four of whom were in attitudes of admiration before Spring, personified by the form of a woman of surpassing beauty crowned with roses, holding a garland of variegated flowers, which she passed lovingly through her outstretched fingers. The face was upturned, with the pure expression of a madonna, and at the touch of her feet delicate blooms sprang forth, while a kneeling youth clothed in fine linen of palest saffron gazed in silent wonder on this work of Nature.

Paul paused, looking rather dejectedly out of the window.

"Beppo," he exclaimed, at the end of a few minutes' deep thought, "what am I to do? I shall never finish this."

"But, maestro," cried the boy in shocked accents, "not to finish—what sacrilege! Ah! I cannot bear to feel that you are in earnest."

"Look at that," said Paul, pointing in dismay to the mere sketched-in portion of the unfinished central figure; "where can I find a

model for that? Headless she is and headless I fear she will remain. She must be beautiful," he continued, musingly; "she should also be innocent or else I can never obtain the result I wish for. I must finish it!" For an instant the agony of the thwarted enthusiast veiled his eyes. "Beppo, thou shouldst be able to find me such a model."

"*Farò il possibile, ma—*" and the boy spread out his hands in a gesture signifying that although the difficulty seemed insurmountable, yet he would do his utmost to overcome it.

"Thou thinkest all women pretty, but art doubtful about the second qualification?" laughed Paul, then noticing the lad's look of complete innocence, he went on more gravely. "*Nonostante*, I have every confidence in thy judgment. Let me know if thou hearest of anything promising."

The work proceeded quietly for some time, the artist absorbed in the task he loved, while Beppo noiselessly busied himself putting the varied litter of the studio in order.

For a boy who had been brought up among such surroundings as the commonplace influences of the work-a-day life of the peasant, it was wonderful to find, half-awakened, a true sense of the beautiful. Paul had discovered

that the youth possessed a rare gift of color; an innate perception of its value enabled him, in modest, half-timid sentences, fragments of a more than half-formed idea, to be of aid to the artist himself, for Paul, with all his dreams, never lost from view the possibility of learning either from Nature or from this lad, whose blind soul could teach with unmistakable clearness the lesson of truth, and help unconsciously the spirit of the older man to unravel the mysterious workings of Art.

Often when the boy was lost in admiration at the sight of some beautiful object or the particularly happy effect of a combination of colors, Paul had surprised an expression on his pure young face, which at first he strove in vain to analyze. It was not merely pleasure derived from the sight of some beautiful object, nor the rapt expression of the devotee in the presence of some sacred relic; it was, Paul finally concluded, the essence of soul, illuminating the dark places and bringing into clearness the appreciation, the apperception of the born artist. Would that he had time to develop this talent, to awaken into flame this holy spark; but Paul's artistic life was too full to permit it and he must be content to borrow in silence. Surely this was not selfish or wrong, for it was but a fair exchange. Beppo pos-

sessed other talents, too ; from his mother's people he inherited a shrewdness which enabled him to be of service to the master for whom he cherished an undying affection. Paul could see that the lad had excellent judgment and an infallible standard by which he read the characters of his fellow-men. Beppo moreover was not sly, unless it suited his purpose, and it may be doubted if the boy, who had the undefiled soul of a child, was conscious of double-dealing. It is when we know we are doing wrong that it proves hurtful to us ; with Beppo this faculty became awakened only when in defence of one he loved.

Paul, having for the moment completed the particular piece of work he had been engaged upon, turned his attention to some of the other figures. Backgrounds or cloud-effects were to him never finished in the exact meaning of the word, but when one has accomplished all one can, the intelligence of one's audience may be left to fill in the gap,—but the figures were real, possible of fuller and more concise treatment. The four females were good, better than he had thought possible, but the expression of the kneeling boy was not to his mind. What was it ? There was something lacking, some touch needed to give it more satisfying amplitude. Beppo had been his model for this

figure, but Paul had never been able to snatch the exact expression he felt necessary. A model, if he is in sympathy with the artist, is more or less under a strain, especially as he is seeking tacitly to aid. What Paul wanted was to come on the expression he knew of unawares, at a moment when it would be possible to transfer it with promptness and accuracy to the canvas. He had seen this particular expression many times, but when he returned to the studio it was too late and he could not recall it sufficiently—the moment had fled, the divine instant when the soul peeps into heaven—for it was too fleeting, too intangible to last, too ephemeral for but temporary existence.

With a feeling akin to despair Paul turned to Beppo. The boy was standing on a stool holding out a little Capo di Monte figurine. Paul's face as he turned to the lad was dumbly appealing, but as his gaze fell on him, he repressed a start, for the expression, the long-desired one, was there and in his very grasp. Laboring under strong excitement, but quickly and quietly, he made a few strokes. Almost trembling under the effect of his agitation, he added the last touch and threw his head back, a trifle on one side; it was just right, yes, he knew he had won as he glanced from the boy to the canvas and back.

"Thank God, it is perfect!" he cried aloud, dropping his mahl-stick inadvertently.

Beppo turned, and the reverie was over. He hastily replaced the little figure and stepped down quickly to Paul's side.

"*Cosa è successo?*" he began, anxiously, but, reassured by Paul's expression, he smiled and turned once more to his prosaic duties.

"Beppo!" Paul said, after a few minutes' silence, "come here and tell me what thou thinkest of this"—indicating the big canvas with a wave of his paint-brush; "I want an honest opinion, my boy,"—he laid his hand on the youth's shoulder as he spoke, and looked with kindly interest into the sensitive face, with the clear eyes and delicate features, the wealth of curly dark-brown hair surmounting his noble brow, at the firm mouth, the quivering nostrils, and the well-knit frame. "Thou knowest I value thy opinion, and that is the reason I am asking thee to tell me the truth."

The boy's eyes grew more liquid, a quick flush mantled the dark skin, a blush of pleasure at the older man's condescension.

"The maestro is but surely making a little pleasantry. What can I say? Indeed, I would help if I could, but——" and Beppo ended with a broad, comprehensive gesture,

meant to express his complete disavowal of complicity, though a willingness to satisfy Paul's request as much as lay in his power, but the Master must take the consequences. "How can I, a child of peasants, give an opinion?" he cried.

For answer Paul turned the lad towards the picture, and, with both hands on his shoulders, laughed softly. "My Beppo, great goose that thou art! Dost thou remember this little study?" he asked, picking up a small sketch of a girl's head. "Is it the same as the one in the big picture?"

"It is and again it is not," exclaimed the boy, surprised. "Is it a miracle?" he gasped.

"Thou seest I followed thy teaching," laughed Paul, thoroughly enjoying himself.

"My teaching!" Beppo cried out in bewilderment.

"*Senti*. I will explain. Two weeks ago I came into the studio—thou wert here alone and did not hear me. This small picture was in thy hand, and I—*ebbene*"—pointing again to the figure on the larger canvas—"I profited by thy suggestions."

"It was presumption of the most terrible kind," whispered Beppo, the tears almost starting to his eyes at the remembrance of what

was to him a heinous crime. "Oh! I will not so offend again," he ended in accents of distress.

"Oh, yes," replied Paul, smiling, "thou wilt. See, I shall sit over here on this stool," suiting the action to the word, "and thou shalt be my teacher—I wish it. Look long at the picture and do not speak until thou art ready. Take thy time, and I will wait."

The boy, after a frightened glance at Paul, turned to the great canvas as he had been bid, and remained silently studying it.

Paul chose to treat the affair seriously, being more than half superstitious as to the result of Beppo's criticism. He watched the young face relax and the eyes grow dreamy, and, finally, troubled. He bent forward in some anxiety—it was too much like a séance, but he felt powerless to interrupt now; besides, he was frankly interested.

At the boy's first words, uttered in a dull voice, strangely unlike his own, the man listened eagerly.

Beppo's voice rose and fell as he mechanically pointed out what were to him certain defects, but he appeared entirely oblivious to his surroundings, gazing fixedly at the picture. It was uncanny, thought Paul, but after a few rapid glances about him to assure himself that

this was no dream but a reality, he listened to the voice, and was content to drink in the knowledge which was being unconsciously disseminated. An odd sensation came to him as he thus listened—he imagined that it would be impossible for him to move. It was an unpleasant feeling, and he tried to laugh it off; he so far succeeded, as the words of the young teacher droned on, that he managed to assume an appearance of calmness, until, with a start, he jumped to his feet, for the voice had suddenly ceased, and Beppo was staring at him in dismay.

“Forgive me, oh, maestro,” he cried; “I almost fancied I was alone. I speak too much; it is my great fault. Forgive me, I beg.”

“It is nothing,” answered the man, a strange feeling of elation possessing him. “Go now for thy mid-day meal, and take a good siesta, for thou art tired. To-morrow I will see thee again.”

After the boy had gone, Paul sat in contemplation before his picture.

“The boy is right. That is bad—this is wrong, but, thanks to what I have heard, it can be made right. . . . It is strange—passing strange,” he murmured, as he rose. A bell sounded with incessant clang. It was the

luncheon hour, and he must not keep Anna waiting. Poor Anna, he thought with momentary tenderness ; but the peasant boy's words were uppermost in his mind as he still paused before his beloved picture.

III

ANNA was waiting for Paul, and although the second gong had sounded, ten minutes passed and yet he did not come. One of the waiters had come out to announce that luncheon was ready; she had yawned, dropped her stupid novel several times, and finally, after looking in the direction of their villa, turned and went in, passing through the hall and down the long corridor leading to the large dining-room at the end of the hotel.

She turned to look back with a smile of greeting, thinking her husband was following, but stepped aside as a strange man leisurely passed her. Anna could not help glancing at the tall, distinguished-looking person who had thus surprised and startled her out of her ordinary composure.

She perceived he was thin, perhaps rather ascetic in appearance, and straight enough, but with a slight, almost imperceptible stoop,—or was it the way he carried his head? She could not decide. It might be that the coat, of a distinctly clerical cut, fitted badly, for no collar showed behind, though that there was one she

had noticed when he was advancing towards her. His features were good. But what was it which had fascinated and at the same time produced a vague sensation of discomfort? It could not be merely his personality, for that was not in the least degree offensive, yet one does, she reflected, shrink at the sudden presence of a toad. No, the simile was not happy, for the only recollection she had of him was the beam of a pair of gray eyes, keen, but at the same time kindly. Kindly? Was that the word which described their slightly ambiguous expression? She was undecided, yet he had merely looked gravely at her with the momentary interest of a casual stranger. Fancies, she acknowledged, of a highly-strung temperament, nothing more—of course not. It would be better not to dwell on such morbid and perhaps dangerous thoughts.

She had been walking, during her reflections, towards the dining-room, when she caught a glimpse a second time of the same intellectual head, and noticed in the clearer light that the hair was shaven on the upper part, showing the tonsure of a priest. She bowed to the head-waiter and took her seat at their small table by the window. Almost immediately afterwards Paul came in from the garden.

"I should think by this time, Anna, you

would see the wisdom of not waiting for me. You know I am an artist and, in the eyes of most people, not to be held responsible. Time, I have always heard, has no place in my profession."

"And yet," remarked Anna, reflectively, "who would take you for an artist? Not by your works—I don't mean that—but by your appearance."

"The usual stage artist is, I know, conventional. He is dirty-looking, has long black locks, and a general air, as Dickens so aptly puts it, of the 'great unwashed.'"

"Just why it is so ridiculous to compare you to one of them—that is what I meant," exclaimed Anna, seriously, not seeing that Paul was laughing at her.

"You are glad, you mean, that I am clean, that I live a clean life, that ——"

"I was going to say," began Anna, looking up quickly, but stopped as she realized that Paul was making fun at her expense.

Her first impulse was to make some sharp reply, but what would be the use; and besides, such moments when she and Paul seemed to find themselves on a common level were so rare, that she felt little could be gained by quarreling. She always lost her temper, and he became cold and sarcastic.

"Give me a little more wine, dear," was what she finally said ; "there, that's enough. How many people there are !" she continued. "Who is that stunning-looking woman, next to the table by the window ? No, not that one, the other—just by Lady Adela's."

"You mean that woman with the black hair and the olive complexion ?"

Anna furtively watched Paul as his eyes fell on the woman she had pointed out. His appreciation of her was evidently a pleasant one, and Anna wondered if she had been wise in diverting the conversation, for Paul's artistic nature, touched to the core, made him oblivious for the moment to all else.

"By Jove !" he whispered, in awe-struck tones, "I should like to paint that woman. I must try to meet her. I wonder who she is ?"

His wife became apprehensive. Had she innocently lighted a slow fuse ? Nonsense ; how foolish she was ! Could it be possible that she was going to allow herself to be disturbed by every incident, however trivial ! First the priest, and now this—this person.

"And do you think her so beautiful ?" she remarked. "How could I have said she was stunning ? She has, I confess, a certain *cachet*, but sensuality so grossly painted never appeals to a woman."

"Are you doing me the honor of being jealous?" asked Paul, semi-sarcastically.

"Jealous, dear?" said Anna, a trifle too sweetly. "Oh, no, I should never willingly give you that satisfaction. I was only—stating a fact. Coffee? Yes," to the waiter, "for two, and one *fine champagne*."

When the garden was reached, both seated themselves in silence at one of the painted iron tables. Paul took out a small sketch-book and made a few strokes in it, while a reminiscent smile sat lightly on his expressive face. The coffee was poured out and the cordial was measured into the tiny glass before either spoke.

"Don't you think she was really good-looking?" asked Paul, quickly adding a few finishing touches to his sketch.

Anna, who had been looking coldly at the distant snow-peaks, replied softly :

"Good-looking is not beautiful. For the purposes of a model, she might not be acceptable, but I have never cared for that style. It is too coarse, too frankly vulgar for my taste."

"As a model? Of course," replied Paul, ironically. "You did not think I wished to make love to the woman?"

"One never knows about a man," muttered

Anna, laughing nervously to conceal her vexation. "A woman such as she is not liked by other women, but men often admire the type."

"Your remarks are not, I hope, intended to be personal. If so, they are in exceedingly bad taste."

A pause followed, Paul stirring his coffee steadily, while Anna bit her lip, striving to control her wounded feelings. Of course she was in the wrong, but it was Paul's fault, and could she be held responsible if she lost her temper, when her husband tried so little to understand her?

Presently, remorseful, Anna looked up, words of love trembling on her lips, but Paul appeared so absorbed that she remarked coldly :

"I am going over to Varenna this afternoon to have tea with Madame de Morès. She has asked me so often when she may see your picture. What am I to tell her?"

"You are aware," he replied, lighting a cigarette, "that I cannot finish it until I find a satisfactory model. Tell her the picture remains in an unfinished state and I don't know when she can see it."

"I shall certainly not give her such an uncivil message," said Anna, looking about

indifferently at the other occupants of the garden.

"Message! I never understood it to be a message. If she wants to come, ask her over for tea some day next week. Perhaps I shall unearth a model by that time."

"I beg your pardon, sir," asked a voice in perfect English, but with a slightly foreign accent, "may I trouble you for a light?"

Paul, glancing up at the speaker, passed a box of fuses.

"Thank you very much," said the priest, for it was he, and both men bowed and raised their hats. Paul noticed, however, that the other did not at once take his departure, so invited him to sit down.

Anna, under the influence of some indefinable emotion, glanced involuntarily at her husband—why she could not say. It was but momentary, and then she found herself silently acknowledging the priest's courteous salutation.

She tried to convince herself these were not the mysterious workings of Fate. That would be too absurd a view to take of a very commonplace situation; it was merely that she and her husband were making the acquaintance of a stranger who, from outward appearance, was courteous and seemingly presentable. Per-

haps the reason of her former feeling of repulsion was the fact that he was undoubtedly a Roman Catholic, and Anna, in the fervency of her own belief, was limited in her judgment as to those of other faiths. Having settled this question in her own mind, she listened eagerly for the first words of the stranger, for she was always partially influenced by the sound, though more by the quality, of a voice.

"If you were not an American," he was saying in a pleasantly modulated but firm tone, "as I very well know, I should be certain you were not English."

"How, may I ask," exclaimed Paul, in surprise, "did you know we were Americans and not English?"

Anna somehow, she could not tell how, felt distinctly relieved. She was conscious that her foolish prejudices against the priest were melting away, for, having heard him speak, she was certain by her superstitious test that there was nothing to account for her former unfounded dislike. The priest was only a man of the world; his manners easy but insinuating, and certainly did not possess that peculiarly irritating quality of oiliness which was so specially unpleasant, and which she had feared they would have.

"Two questions, and but one answer to

make. Everyone knows the Signor Trefusis by reputation, so that question is disposed of; but if I had not known it already, I should have realized instinctively that you were not English. Why, you ask—for I see the words trembling on your lips—because to me, the English, though I like them, are never so *simpatici*, and,” smilingly making a deprecatory gesture, “I am never so certain of such a cordial reception as you have been good enough to grant me. Believe me, I am not unappreciative.”

“But we have done nothing——” began Anna, leaning slightly forward.

“Ah! that is just it, Signora,” replied the priest, gently, “and it is true that actions speak louder than words. Yours were gracious, you cannot prevent them being so, and I was sure of making pleasant friends.”

“You have been here some time?” inquired Paul, after a pause.

“About two weeks,” replied the priest. “I have a small villa a short distance from here and I shall remain until the weather becomes unpleasantly hot.”

“May we not know to whom we are speaking?” asked Paul politely, out of curiosity.

“But yes, without doubt. I am Father Lamian, a Jesuit priest. But we are not as

black as we are painted, I assure you, Signora."

"I did not say anything," exclaimed Anna, quickly.

"No," answered Father Lamian, "you did not say anything, I am aware. Is it a guilty conscience? But, I beg your pardon, I forget. We are soldiers of Christ and are always on the lookout for hidden foes ; that is my excuse. Do not let us talk religion, for we are, if I mistake not, religious enemies. I make a rule," he continued smoothly, "never to attempt to make converts. Those in trouble come to me and I do what I can to help them."

"If religion is going to make enemies of us, I would rather not discuss it," said Paul. "I am afraid that I am not careful about such things," with a furtive glance at Anna, whose lips he noticed were slightly compressed,— "going to church, you know, and saying my prayers."

"Religion means a great deal to me, and for that reason I cannot discuss it," remarked Anna quietly.

"Let us meet, then, on common ground. I love art, and surely there, though I am but a *dilettante*, we can lose ourselves in those mysterious labyrinths of *chiaro oscuro* we love so much, of delicate tints and the scented by-

ways of fancy. But you, Signora, have some artistic qualities, too, is it not true?"

"I play on the piano, but only when I am alone or if my husband asks me," answered Anna, blushing a little.

"Music is a great resource as well as a pleasure to many. It is the balm, too, for all sorts of pain, but most effective for troubles of the heart."

The priest's voice uttered these words almost reflectively, thus robbing them of any personal application; they flowed on like the gentle course of a silver rill purling over smooth stones in peaceful harmony, until Mrs. Trefusis felt that her sensitive nature was satisfied. She listened to the subsequent conversation, without herself taking part in it, and little by little her morbid fears subsided until, unconsciously, she yielded to the potent magnetism of his personality, falling, as the minutes passed, more completely under the influence of his subtle spell.

IV

THE day had been warm, with a suspicion of thunder in the air, so, after a comforting *déjeuner*, it was not surprising that Mrs. Trefusis decided to don a peignoir, in this case a blue crêpe trimmed with valenciennes, drop off for awhile, lulled by an impossible book, and let the world go on without her.

It was furthermore not extraordinary that three-quarters of an hour later her eyes still remained closed. She had lived long enough in Italy to appreciate the luxury of a siesta, the hour when *dolce far niente* is almost a necessity, but—she would never acknowledge that she had been asleep. She had “been quiet for a few moments”; she had “been thinking”; or, she “had heard every word that was said”. Not very new excuses, dear lady, but this time you are asleep, no doubt about it, and soon will wake refreshed—for it is already cooler, as a pleasant little breeze is beginning to ruffle the smooth surface of the lake.

The whistle of a passing steam-boat causes her to stir, and presently the eyes, with their long brown lashes, open. She rises and goes

to the window to raise the *persiennes* and lower the awning. This done, she wanders aimlessly about the room.

"What shall I do?" she exclaimed crossly, speaking aloud, as was her habit. "It is almost an hour before tea, and I need something to do. I feel too nervous for music. Shall I go up and see Paul? No, it would not do; I suppose he is working on his picture."

She fidgeted about, first in one place and then in another, occupying herself with this and that, without settling to any one pursuit, ending her peregrinations at her desk, where she seated herself. Resting her elbows on it, she pushed back a stray lock of hair, reached for a sheet of paper and put it back, undecided.

"It is too hot to write."

Suddenly she paused and bit her lip in indecision. She was tempted to open a certain drawer and examine the contents of an old leather-bound book, a diary of long ago.

"Dare I?" She hesitated, then with a swift movement rose and bolted the door.

Seated on the end of the sofa, she gingerly fingered the thin book which she had hastily snatched from its hiding-place. The date of the first entry was some sixteen years ago.

In that insignificant volume she well knew

there were scenes of the past, vividly painted, which she had long since thrust into the background of her memory, and which she was also aware should remain there ; but she made up her mind to yield to the temptation and open the little book.

Who does not know the pleasure of giving in to a temptation deferred, the vain resistance, the moment of indecision, then the rapture one feels when the barriers are overthrown at last and the flood of desire is gratified !

The following extracts were what she read over to herself, although she had many years ago vowed that she would never look at the book again :

April 24.—Dined at the Livingstons. Had a very good time. Sat next to Hillary Neville—never met him before—found him agreeable. He is witty, and talks well. Does not look strong. Wonder if he thought I was nice ? Paul Trefusis was there, too—met him before—very nice-looking. Resembles an Englishman in appearance. Miss Livingston sang—has lovely voice, and I played—was terrified. Mr. Neville did some clever card tricks. I approve of drawing-room tricks, helps to pass the time if everyone feels dull. Mr. Trefusis made some interesting sketches of us ; he is

an artist, and the caricatures were most amusing—I should think Mary Mannice would have been furious. I like Mr. Trefusis—he commands respect—how foolish—but I mean it. He is strong, just the reverse of Hillary Neville. I am afraid he works too hard—he is a broker and looks pale. Most of the girls wore pinks and yellows—I had on my blue—it is so becoming. I would adore to wear black—it would be stunning, but too old for me, I am afraid. Mr. Trefusis walked home with me—he is hunting for another studio—hopes to go abroad some day—can't afford it yet. I like him very much—he is so much alive, but Hillary Neville is interesting, too, perhaps more so. I thought the men were going 'to remain all night in the smoking-room, but they came out at last. I wonder what men say when women are not with them? I am sure they are quite different then.

April 30.—It is my birthday, my nineteenth, and Mr. Trefusis is giving a theatre party—I think he likes me. I wonder if he thinks me a flirt? I tried to find out if Mr. Neville was invited—not directly, but diplomatically. I asked who were going, the men of course; but he would not tell me. I like men better than women. He told me two of the girls, and I just looked straight before me and said

"Really!" in my most forbidding manner. I can be very severe when I want to, but I could not keep it up with Mr. Trefusis, he looked so hurt and repentant. . . .

May 8.—Hillary has been to see me, twice this week, of course in the afternoon about five, as I now remember that I told him I was usually at home at that hour—in the season one never calls in the evening—and he was very nice. One reason I began to like him was because he took his tea strong, it showed character. He is beginning, I am afraid, to fall in love with me ; a woman, even a young woman, knows the incipient signs of the malady—but I am not sure whether I—still I can imagine him as a very ardent lover, for he is so much in earnest. It is possible I may have trouble with him.

August 29.—Aunt Alice and I have just returned from Europe, and go to Connecticut to-morrow. I met Paul in the street to-day, and I decided that I loved him, he was so tall and straight. He offered to take us to the theatre to-night, and would ask some one to play Aunt Alice off on, say—Neville. There was a potential situation of happiness for me, between the devil and the deep sea ; on one side the man I almost loved, and the man who loved me on the other. Well, we went, and

the play was dull, and I am afraid Aunt A. had an awful time of it. I really got a good deal out of it, surprising as it may seem. Mr. Trefusis—no, he is Paul to me even now—was too dear, and Neville, for the first time, rather tiresome ; he had not the wit to enter into the spirit of the thing. . . .

September 15.—A terrible thing happened to-day as I was exercising that tiresome collie, who is always running away, when I do not want him to, and vice versa. Dogs are so inconsistent, and invariably lack tact. Well, the terrible thing was that suddenly Hillary Neville stood before me. I do not mean to say that the fact that he was there was so terrible, but what happened afterwards. The first thing, of course, was that Racer ran away, and that left me alone to face the inevitable ; I realized it as soon as I looked at Hillary's face. I had no time to prepare myself or to prevent him bursting into a passionate flood of eloquence. I do not know how he began, he seemed to be in the midst of it before I was aware of what was happening. I knew then—it was too late, I had been taken unawares when quite off my guard—it had all come about so suddenly. All at once, I am still trembling as I write, he drew me to him and was kissing me, on my hair, my lips, my

hands, and saying: "I love you, I love you, I love you. Do not answer me now, I will not listen. I will never give you up until I know you love another." "Mr. Neville!" I cried, "how dare you!" and yet I could not help pitying him, he was so much in earnest, and I felt as if I must burst into tears, which was pure nervousness on my part, for I could not love him then, and I felt it would never be possible for me to do so, yet I could not tell him—it would have been better if I could have; but he would not have listened, and so I said nothing, and he left after vowing that nothing would induce him to give me up. He said, too, that I could not prevent him from loving me, which was true. Then it was, as soon as he had disappeared from view, I showed myself a true woman, for I sat down and cried. For the first time I felt bitterly angry, and yet I pitied him in spite of it all. Was that weak of me? . . .

October 2.—I heard from Paul to-day, and by Aunt Alice's invitation, he is coming to make a visit at our house.

October 3.—I had another scene with Hilary, who came to say good-by. He looked ill, and my heart could not help going out in pity, and I wished I could do something for him. I am glad for two reasons that he is

going, first, because these interminable scenes make me very nervous, and the other, that it would never do for them to meet, for Paul will be here to-morrow.

October 4.—He has come and I must have shown him how glad I am that he is here—the light in my eyes clearly revealed that. My heart beat so loudly I felt sure he must hear it.

October 7.—We understand each other so well—not a word of love has passed between us, but I am sure he must know I love him and I know he is certain that he loves me, at least, I am.

December 1.—We have returned to New York, and Paul called this afternoon. I told him to come then for I should be alone. He came on the stroke of the hour I had named. He was nervous, dear old boy, and I am afraid I was too. He began to speak after we had had a cup of tea and were comfortably settled before a roaring fire. I do not know what he said or what I answered, but—we are engaged. It is not to be announced until the first of January. Then it was that a very awkward *contretemps* took place. By the mistake of a stupid maid someone was announced. It was Hillary Neville. We, Paul and I, stopped dead, so to speak, and I am sure we must have looked foolish. Mr. Neville

came to a full stop, too ; he had come in quite confidently, but now looked piteously from one to the other. Then I suppose, realizing the truth, he turned gray and his hand gripped a convenient chair, until I saw his knuckles were white. One moment passed in complete silence, then : " I have come to say good-by," he said in a voice which was quiet and dull ; " you see, I am leaving for the Adirondacks to-morrow. I am not well." There was an imperceptible sob in his weak voice and before I knew it he had shaken my hand in an anguished fashion and was gone. I threw myself into Paul's arms, half laughing, half crying, until he said : " Poor chap. I am sorry for him ; how ill he seemed." Would he have been as grieved if he had known the truth. . . .

When Anna had regained sufficient composure to pick up the diary which had caused her so many varied emotions, she realized that it must be tea-time. Wearied by the exciting perusal of the old story, she set about repairing as far as possible the ravage caused by the strain placed on her feelings. She bathed her eyes in cold water, and felt considerably refreshed.

The fatal volume was safely put away in its hiding-place, with the determination that it

should be burned at the first opportunity, and she was about to make her way to the hotel when Giovanna, the peasant chorewoman, ran after her with three letters, which she presented with a curtsy and a "*favorisca, Signora.*"

She thrust them into her dress, with merely a hasty glance at their superscriptions. Two she noticed were for Paul and the third for herself. She was too hungry at present to occupy herself or her mind with a thought beyond her tea—the letters would do later.

On her return from the hotel about an hour afterwards she seated herself in her own room to read her letter.

The handwriting had a certain vague familiarity, but she did not at once recognize it; it seemed to be one she had once known, now sadly changed, as if the writer were in a state of great weakness or a very old person. This impression was strengthened when she held the open sheet before her and saw the lines of pain stretch out before her eyes.

The letter was a comparatively long one and at first she could not make out who her unknown correspondent was. Then even before her eye in its cursory glance caught the shakily written signature at the end, she realized in some intuitive way that it was from Hillary.

Hastily turning back she began at the beginning, reading quickly the sprawling characters:

"DEAR FRIEND,—I am writing you after many years in the hope that you will accede to my request. It is a great deal to ask and I want you to forgive me. I am a dying man and what I must see once again before the end comes is the dear face I loved so long ago. Perhaps you have forgotten, but I have not. Your image, which is ever before me as fresh and as vigorous as of yore, when my love was buoyant and hopes were bright, has been my solace through the long, hopeless years,—years of pain which I have tried to feel would not end in sadness as they soon must.

"Forgive me, dear, and come to me, for I love you still. Is that wrong? No, a thousand times no, for I am soon to see the glories of this world depart, and it has been a beautiful one to me, despite the suffering, and I want to carry with me the image of you to cheer me on my lonely way. Do not disappoint me, do not let the customs of an unjust world stand in the way, but come, my love, my only love. It has taken me almost a week to scrawl these lines to you, for I am no longer able to sit up; they propped me on every side with pillows and I am so cold or so hot, I hardly know

which, for with my great feebleness I feel it is scarcely of use for me to struggle much longer. Anna, how could you have so wounded my love?—for by so doing, it is cruel to say, but none the less true, you have killed me—there is but little or no life left in my poor wasted frame, but I bear you no ill-will—you acted for the best and I know you have married a good man who, I feel, has made you happy, and that has been a great comfort to me in the long night of my useless life. May God bless you, dear, and keep you safe from all harm. I am keeping myself alive for the honor of seeing you once more before I die,—I know you will not fail me, my darling. I will not say good-by, for that is too cruel a word, and I am certain that whatever happens you will come. If you cannot love me, pity me, if you will; but come, come, come.

“Yours everlastingly, for love cannot die,

“HILLARY NEVILLE.”

Anna sat for some time immovable, until she was conscious that tears were slowly making their way down her cheeks; then she rose, taking a sudden determination to reply at once. She addressed the envelope and hid the letter in a safe place, to be destroyed with the diary later.

The open sheet remained blank, for Anna could not think what she ought to say. "Poor Hillary," she whispered, "dying and alone; it is too sad!" She could not help being very much shocked by his letter, with the shadow of the grave, as it seemed, upon it.

"DEAR MR. NEVILLE,—For various reasons, it is quite impossible for me to come to you, but if the pity of an old friend can bring you peace, it is yours, given freely and with heart-felt sympathy. Later, I will see what can be done. I send my love to my old comrade.

"Yours in the bonds of our old friendship,
"ANNA TREFUSIS."

This letter she sent to the sanatorium from which Hillary had penned those heart-breaking lines.

"Could I have done anything else?" she asked herself, in dismay and doubt.

"What a cruel world this is!" she thought, as she rose and put on her hat to go out.

V

THE intimacy between Paul and Father Lamian had been progressing with surprising rapidity. Paul himself did not realize how much he depended on the priest's judgment, who, far from being an amateur, was thoroughly conversant with the technique of painting ; literature, too, he had studied, while to add to his natural grace of manner, he was blessed with tact, the most important element necessary to success, which with his other attainments made him a foe not to be defied or a friend to be treated lightly.

Father Lamian did not thrust himself upon Paul, but in a perfectly natural way it became a custom for these two to meet after luncheon, dinner, or both, and enjoy a chat about various matters of mutual interest. The priest was a brilliant man and introduced with magic intuition those subjects the artist would be interested in, and which he himself thoroughly understood—not as a mere conversationalist of fashion, who discourses on common matters of every-day interest, but as a man who knows well what he is talking about. In other

words, the priest was clever, but not superficial, and found the task of insinuating himself into Paul's good graces a pleasant one. Paul, strange to say, saw nothing in the man save a most delightful companion.

"Why do you sit there, my dear boy, doing nothing?" asked Father Lamian one day, as the two were talking in Paul's studio.

Trefusis, lying at ease in a *chaise longue*, did not at first reply. He was looking rather perplexedly at the huge canvas with its blank space standing out like an ugly sore, for which he could not find a soothing unguent.

"What can I do?" he said, at length; "you see my difficulty. Find me what I want, and in no time the picture is finished. I have made hundreds of sketches, but either I am not in accord with the model, the woman does not please me, or I lack the divine afflatus——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the priest, in mild derision; "to say that you have not the gift of God—the *feu sacré*,—my poor fellow, do not let us speak of that. Should we not rather," he continued in his mellow voice, which was calculated and justly to cheer the lagging spirit of the artist, "see what is the best thing to be done? You need not tell me such a woman as you are looking for does not exist. Ah!" he cried, putting up his hand, "it shall not be. We

must and shall discover the paragon you need to finish what, I can well see, is to be your *chef d'œuvre*."

The priest touched his lips in token of silence and reverently pointed upwards, but the other shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah! who knows?" sighed the priest, Paul thought a trifle sadly, "but do not despair; remember the old saying, '*Chi va piano, va sano e va lontano*.' You see it will never do to be impatient. Take my advice. I am an old man, and I know; you must not think because your ideal is long in materializing that it will not come at all; again, guard against believing every model to be the one you are waiting for, however perfect she may seem. '*Timeo Danaos; festina lente*;' the right one will come, and you will have no difficulty in recognizing her.

"That is all very well, but I am no nearer the end than at first," exclaimed Paul, still dejectedly, but somewhat influenced by the priest's advice. "What is your idea about the general conception of Spring?"

"Spring is the season of increase, abundance, and fruitfulness," began Father Lamian, after a pause. "It is a time of hope, of love, and of peace. The essence of all these is

contained in the perfect woman. In our religion—forgive me for introducing the Church into our conversation, but what I wish to say is best taught by its precepts—we have the Madonna, or the Virgin Mary, as she is sometimes called, who in herself is an example of all the attributes I have enumerated.”

“The Madonna we consider merely as a woman. That she was the mother of our Lord is one thing, but to clothe her in divinity and give her all the above-named qualities, as if she were——”

“Do you deny that the Blessed Virgin did possess the virtues which we believe absolutely were hers?” asked the priest quietly, but with a strong undercurrent of sternness.

“I do not deny, neither do I affirm. I cannot believe the heresies of a Church which is fundamentally opposed to my early religious teaching,” answered Paul, nettled.

“Then you are content to beg the question?”

There was nothing offensive in the priest’s query, and his earnestness combined with the gentle tone of his voice made Paul feel rather abashed, as if he were somehow losing ground.

Father Lamian did not appear to notice the interruption, but paused as if to study the mental image of the figure he was essaying to present to the eye of the artist.

"You see, then," he went on, "that the face you seek must be pure, it should typify the very qualities which such a being must be conceded to have, and be also an embodiment of them all."

"Forgive me, my dear sir," cried Paul, in a tone of deep contrition; "I allowed myself a moment of weakness in almost doubting your motives. I am sure I beg your pardon."

"*Non c'è di che*," replied the priest politely, but with a shade of well-feigned surprise; "you agree with me, then?"

"Oh, perfectly and unreservedly," said he with the accent of one who has given in under pressure. He knew his companion was right, but he objected to his methods; still, why fence or make a foolish rejoinder?

Father Lamian's smile was conciliatory, but Paul did not see it. It was evident that the priest in his quiet fashion knew he had scored a point in favor of an object hidden in the background of his thoughts, and had thereby put a small spoke in Paul's wheel. What was this object, and how best could it be brought about? His efforts were directed to one end, namely, to induce him to recant his former teaching and become a member of the Society of Jesus. It seemed up-hill work, but he was not dismayed. He had, moreover, learned be-

fore he made their acquaintance that it was Mrs. Trefusis, and not Paul, who was possessed of a large fortune. What part she was to play in this tragedy will be seen hereafter. Suffice it to say that among other things the priest noticed she was madly in love with her husband, but that he did not respond, being blinded by devotion to his art.

"What does your wife do with herself? She can scarcely find music absorbing enough to fill up all her time."

"Anna? Oh, I don't know. She has a good many friends and keeps up an interminable correspondence."

His tone was indifferent, but Father Lamian's undertaking required him to put the above apparently irrelevant question.

"Still, music is a great resource," pursued the priest, "a cure for *ennui*—for, shall we say—sadness?"

His voice was very soft as he uttered the above words, but he smiled gently at the other's insensibility and apparent ignorance of their trend.

"I love music myself, but of course I don't play and I don't know as much about it as my wife—she is really almost a professional—but it is soothing and peaceful."

"Do you not think that the art of music,

the faculty of perceiving a rapid succession of ephemeral sound pictures, requires a special love of that branch of art? In the abstract, music is beautiful as a passing vision is lovely, but it is the very rapidity of the sensation it produces which is, for a very long period of time, fatiguing. Certain music appeals to me more than others. Gounod's 'Ave Maria,' for instance, is, as you say, peaceful and at the same time uplifting."

"Yes," agreed Paul, "religious music has a charm of its own. I feel better when I have heard it. I remember, years ago, hearing the wonderful organ at Haarlem in Holland. We chose our own programme, each one his favorite selection, and sat in the gray silence of the old church listening to the glorious sounds. The sacristan announced that the concert was over as soon as the last note had ceased, just as we were preparing to enjoy the hush which is more thunderous than applause. In company with the others—there were only five of us, a lady authoress, her husband, my friend, and a young Irish girl—I was fearfully let down, and I assure you the pleasure of the evening was spoilt."

"Such conduct was most reprehensible and improper. Of course you wrote to the priest and reported the man?"

"No, we left too early next morning, and besides, the shock of such behavior was forgotten in the real and more lasting pleasure we had enjoyed."

"But in a church!" murmured the Father, crossing himself piously.

Paul smiled, but did not say anything.

"You have met the Signora, as she prefers to style herself—Elena Cantilena?" the priest asked after a few minutes' silence.

"Is that the large, fine-looking woman with the dark hair and that wonderful complexion, which looks as if it might be genuine?" inquired Paul, with an awakening of interest.

"Your description is a graphic one," replied the other with a slow smile, "but it suits the lady in question. Yes, that is she."

"Do you know her?" asked Paul, with a sudden light in his eyes.

"But faintly," answered the other. "I knew her people casually, and—though she hardly realizes how much—she is under obligations to me on behalf of another. She is resting here after a very successful season in Milan."

"I should like to meet her," exclaimed Paul, impulsively, "could you arrange it?"

"It will depend, as most things do, on the lady herself. I believe your wife might enjoy

seeing something of her, too ; they would have so much in common. Her appearance is rather against her, but she is a good girl, only twenty-five years old, and one comes to admire her on closer acquaintance."

Paul smiled faintly at the remembrance of Anna's attack on La Cantilena when they had first seen her in the dining-room of the hotel.

"I will do what I can," pursued the priest, "and let you know how a meeting can be arranged. Speak to your wife, too, for I do not wish to force a casual acquaintance upon her."

"You say you only know her slightly?"

"But yes," replied the other, "we are hedged in by as many conventionalities as *una bella donna*—if any infraction of the rules of our order should come to light, we are liable to be *défroqué*."

"Your rules must be very strict," laughed Paul.

"But your picture, the model?" asked Father Lamian, dismissing the subject in hand summarily. "It is becoming a serious question. How long have you before the picture must be sent in?"

"Oh, I had hoped to finish it for next year—it really should go soon, but you see——"

"Then you need not hurry. So much the

better. One can never make anything but a failure of a subject which is glossed over in haste."

"Tell me something about La Cantilena—who is she?"

Father Lamian gave Paul a quick look and pursed up his lips before he answered.

"She has a history, poor girl, but who has not?" His tone was non-committal, and he gave a comprehensive wave of his white hand with the long tapering fingers as he spoke.

"I cannot tell you," he went on suavely, "the particulars ; however, this I know. Her mother was a respectable peasant, and her father, I understand, a man of position but moderate means. He, I hear, became estranged from the woman but allowed her a pittance for the support of herself and her infant daughter during the period of the mother's life, nothing being said about the daughter's future, or whether she would be provided for after the poor woman died. This sad event took place when the young girl was seventeen years old. The mother, feeling her end approaching, had written a letter with directions that it should be delivered to the one to whom it was addressed by the daughter herself and no one else. In this species of last will and testament, the wretched woman said she be-

lieved that the child, as she still persisted in calling her, had a wonderful voice. She begged Giulio, for the sake of the love he had once sworn he felt for her, to help the child. Would he consent to give her the chance of cultivating this gift of the Madonna, this probability—a strong one, of that there was no doubt—that the dear child had a fortune in the beautiful throat and would in time be able to repay her benefactor? The writer went on to say that she had always kept her marriage certificate hidden, as she had been requested to do, and the child did not know who her father was. For these reasons she hoped that Giulio would grant her dying wish.

“The poor creature was, of course, unable to trace her father or discover anything of his whereabouts, and I ran across her when she was on the verge of destitution and befriended her. The young woman, I soon found out, had a voice of remarkable power and sweetness and I decided that, as the possibility of finding out what had become of her father was so remote, I would, out of charity, myself undertake her musical education, on the distinct condition that she would not divulge who her unknown benefactor was. I was never able to discover the slightest trace of this Giulio, and it is my belief that he must have lured the

girl's mother into a mock-marriage, contracted under an assumed name ; he has never turned up and—will you keep my secret?—I have a prejudice against any one knowing where I distribute my charity. That is all."

Father Lamian rose and walked to the window where he stood looking out in silence.

Paul remained quiet for a time, afraid to break in on his companion's meditations, but at last, his indignation rising, he spoke.

"The man was a beast," he said, in a queer kind of muffled voice, which he scarcely recognized as his own.

"The man, as you very justly say, was a beast," assented the other, sadly. "However," he continued, in his gentle voice, "do not let us dwell on these melancholy topics. What do you wish to say, for I see the dawn of a new desire in your eyes?"

"I want, I must have," stammered Paul, moistening his dry lips, "this woman as a model for my picture. She is, I feel sure, the longed-for one. You said, you remember, that I would know her when she came."

Father Lamian had turned again to look out of the window, so Paul did not see the look of cunning his thin face wore.

"Who can say?" he said, at last ; "I will try my best. Perhaps it may be managed."

"You will help me, then?" asked Paul, putting his hand on the priest's shoulder.

"Yes, of course, I will do what I can, but—I promise nothing. Why, my dear Trefusis," he went on, in quite another tone, "if you can induce this lady to sit to you, as I suppose you are thinking of her for the figure of Spring, your fortune is made."

The quality of his tone was quite changed, and Paul could not help catching the enthusiasm it conveyed.

"Let us hope I may be of assistance to you,—but I must be going now. I shall, however, let you know the result of my labors on your behalf."

After the priest had departed, Paul sat gazing at his great work, until in fancy he saw the face of Elena looking down on him out of the empty space.

On his way to his villa, Father Lamian rubbed his hands briskly together and murmured half aloud :

"In the hollow of my hand I hold the skeins of Fate. All will go well, all will go well."

On a little table by which the priest had been sitting, Paul noticed, as he turned towards the window, a black pocket-book, or so it seemed, which the priest had evidently for-

gotten. He walked over and took it up to put in a safe place. It was nothing more, however, than the priest's little book of devotions,—in other words, his *breviario*.

VI

ELENA and Father Lamian rarely met in public, and then only as mere acquaintances. The one place of meeting when their faces did not wear the masks thought necessary, by one of the conspirators at least, was in the priest's house.

Elena told her friends that he was her *directeur*, at least she had been placed temporarily in his charge. This statement would make possible and explain the nature of her visits to him ; it had been prompted by Father Lamian, and she had not the courage to gain-say his slightest word.

"You have come doubtless for your instructions, my child?" said the priest, without looking up from a large volume he was poring over.

"Yes," replied the woman, in accents as impassive as his own. "You sent for me and I am here."

Father Lamian slowly closed his book, removed his spectacles and carefully polished them before he answered her.

"There is delicate work to be done, but you

with your peculiar talents can *accomplish* what I *desire*."

There was a slight stress laid on the word "accomplish" and a distinct pause before the word "desire," which to the woman's ear gave them a certain significance, indicating the keynote of the man's character.

"What is it you wish me to do, and how can I serve my benefactor?"

Was there perhaps a suspicion of irony in the tone? Yet the words of the question were innocent enough.

"Is it to be a repetition of the affair of two years ago, of Pietro Ricardi?" she continued, as he did not reply. "The elements seem to me the same."

Father Lamian looked pensively out of the window; he appeared to be paying little or no attention to her words.

"What is to be done requires the exercise of care, of *finesse*," he said at last. "You must not fail me."

"Fail you!" she cried, in a tone from which even reproach seemed to have been banished, its cadence was so full of sweetness, and as near an approach to mockery as she dared; "have I ever been able to do that?"

Elena Cantilena, or Massi, which was the only family name she had ever known, and

which she believed to be hers, had never forgotten a memorable interview she had once had with the priest—and she was in no hurry to repeat it. He had told her, in a way she had come to know was one to be dreaded, that he held a weapon, one blow of which would shatter her reputation. He had smiled as he said it, but she knew too well that slow, poisonous smile, and of what he was capable. After the fleeting struggle she sank back into the net, gazing at the beady black eyes fixed steadily on hers, and realized only too well that she was once and for all in this man's power. He had not told her what this fearful threat was, but such was her dread of him that she was afraid to ask further, and recoiled with ill-concealed horror.

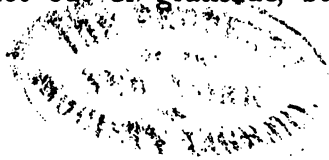
If she were to be always powerless, however, she had but one thought, one wish—the desire to see this man humbled, morally dead, and shunned. Even if she had to sink with him into the abyss, it would not abate her joy the less to see him dethroned from his high estate and turned from as one unclean.

Elena knew him as few did, for she had been his unwilling conspirator in too many scenes ; scenes of revenge or greed, through which he had, coming forth himself unscathed, ~~protected her~~ not out of gratitude, but to

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save her for the next rôle he chose her to play.

"You have not, I believe, met Signora Trefusis?" asked the priest. "She consents to receive you on Tuesday at four," he said, getting a negative answer from her.

"On Tuesday at four?" she repeated, frowning slightly, but appearing to examine very minutely her exquisitely polished nails. "Yes. At the villa, I suppose?"

"At the villa, certainly. You may take some of your Andalusian songs with you—it is the foundation of an intimacy; will you make that quite clear and—act accordingly."

"I begin to understand," she murmured, "but there is more for me to hear, is it not so?" she asked, raising her eyes to his for a moment, with a world of meaning in their violet depths; then the lids languorously descended until the long lashes caressed her soft cheek.

"I wish her to take a lenient view of your possible shortcomings. Surely there are tones in your voice for which one could forgive you much. Let her gradually come under the spell of your influence."

"But there is more?" she persisted, toying nonchalantly with a small dagger which lay on the priest's desk close at hand. There was a

smile on her face and a strange glitter between the narrowed eyelids, but beyond a silent tapping, a noiseless devil's tattoo which her foot played on the polished floor, she was as cold and calm as marble.

"Yes, there is more," acquiesced the priest, slowly, "much more, but—all in good season."

Elena watched a fly buzz on the pane, rising and falling, restless and indefatigable. She saw a small spider descend, weaving its diminutive web; the fly hesitated, receded, struggled when it was too late—all this Elena witnessed idly, as she waited for her companion's next words—and she smiled as she gazed, the smile of the condemned.

"I am commissioned to ask, nay, beg, you to sit as a model for the principal figure in Paul Trefusis's picture."

"Of course," she assented, a trifle wearily. "I am ready to—sell myself—I beg your pardon, I am rather absent-minded to-day. By the way, when is the sitting to take place—the first one, I mean?"

"Then you consent? That is most gracious of you. The arrangement for the hour is but a detail—a mere sidelight."

Elena sighed gently, almost inaudibly, but the quick ear of the other detected the sound, and he smiled grimly.

"It is a pretty comedy, is it not? Signora Anna must love you well before long, but she will be jealous—she shall be jealous, you understand—it will make my task easier."

"Go on," said she, regarding her adversary steadfastly.

"You are incomparably dull to-day, *cara figlia*," he exclaimed, leaning forward to lay his hand for an instant on the head bowed before him. The woman continued to support her chin on one hand, while the other hung listlessly at her side; she winced imperceptibly at his touch, and the red blood surged for the space of an instant up from her beating heart, dyeing the white face scarlet, then fled as suddenly, leaving it pale as death.

"I am listening, pray go on," she breathed hoarsely.

Father Lamian, without looking at her, shrugged his shoulders and proceeded quickly, speaking in tones which fell on the woman's ear with incisive blows, like the pitiless thud of a trip-hammer:

"My object, a laudable one, is to bring Trefusis into my fold as a member of my flock. His sweet wife, who I am told is very liberal in good works, we hope will follow. My work is with the man, but you in your

rôle of sympathetic friend and—shall we say—*ingénue*, have a much more difficult part to play. My plan is to gently lead the artist over the rough places, while you can aid me by fomenting a species of mental irritation between them. You can readily see what faith I have in you, for the estimable task I have set myself is as child's play compared with the path you must tread."

Elena could not bring herself to speak at this moment; her face was buried in her arms, but she was not weeping; the blessed tears would not flow, and her burning eyes remained stubbornly dry. Finally, after an interval, she looked up and spoke in a strained voice.

"I cannot do this thing."

"Have you forgotten, *cara* Elena, that I can, if I wish, crush you as I would a worm? Forgive me for being so positive, but you shall do as I say,—exactly and in every particular."

"Spare me, I beseech you. Beware of the day of retribution," she exclaimed, rising slowly, and pointing an avenging finger at her persecutor, "when your sin shall find you out!"

The priest seemed to be unmoved by these words, and did not allow his cool self-possession to desert him. His only emotion, as far

as could be seen, was one of frank and unconcealed admiration for the woman herself.

"Bravo ! my little one—an actress as well as a singer—you will go far."

Elena, seeing the effect she had produced, sank slowly back in an attitude of deep dejection.

"Come, my child, courage. Remember, it is for Him we are working."

At these words the poor creature raised her head and looked straight at the priest, but he was gazing at her with a gentle, though vaguely amused, expression. Seeing that she was powerless, she sought to gain time by advancing towards him, saying,—

"Pardon me, Father, I am unnerved. Let me go now, and I will come back. I must think this over. I promise to return."

Although she felt that reflection would be of little avail, yet she wished for a breathing space to recover from this terrible man's unvarnished hypocrisy, as she considered it. Receiving a sign from him, which she interpreted as one of assent, she turned quickly and fled from the room.

As soon as the door had closed, Father Lamian sank into his chair, from which he had involuntarily risen. What if he were to fail now, when all seemed going well, by the

qualms of a semi-hysterical woman! By heaven! it should not be. He knew he was powerless to compel her to act save by threats. Bah! Was he a woman himself to be frightened so easily?

Meanwhile Elena, who had left the study so bravely, as she felt the fresher air of the open blowing on her heated face, tottered to a bench and sat down, realizing that she was beaten. Stunned, but obstinate, she reflected that there was no possibility of refusal. She looked out over the waters of the lake with the gaze of a hunted animal. She reviewed the situation, but could see no escape. Again the old terror seized her—the terror of his unnamed threat. What if she refused? No, that she clearly saw would be an utter futility. This question settled, she might well have gone in and faced the inevitable, yet still she sat there like one in a dream, unable to find courage to do so. At last, with a bitter sigh, she rose wearily, with the knowledge that nothing could be gained by further delay.

As she reached the dreaded threshold, she suddenly started, stung by the possibility of a fleeting thought. Suppose that his power were mere blackmail? Defy him, then, and take away this sword of Damocles which he held the secret of releasing! No, she had not the

moral courage to fight him. She was afraid, nay more, stood in mortal terror of this fiend incarnate. And, then, he was her benefactor—he had been generous; she had best remember that alone, and as for the rest

Lost in these thoughts, she once more found herself before him. With arms stretched wide, her head sank lower as she uttered, in low tones, the one word "Father."

"Be seated, child. It has been a struggle, but I have won."

There was no triumph in the gentle tones, only as it seemed an infinite sadness.

She sank on the chair he pointed out to her, but she still maintained her listless attitude as she proceeded to follow up an advantage which he was content to feel he had gained.

"You have said in your heart this man is a hypocrite. What is a hypocrite? One who feigns to be what he is not. Am I that? In my character of priest I am endeavoring to save two erring souls, in order that they may see the truth and receive their reward. I am doing evil that good may come—it is the watchword of my faith! In my action I can see no wrong, for I believe in my heart that the end justifies the means, and—the church will profit from the result."

"*Mea culpa, mea culpa,*" moaned the

wretched woman, kneeling abjectly before him.

Father Lamian regarded her intently, and then, in solemn tones, began the formula of the "Confiteor."

He did not all at once act upon this state of spiritual exaltation to which he had reduced her; he waited in silence for the calm which he was certain would follow. In this desired state he could more perfectly impress upon her the details of his plan of action, and she would then receive his words as one in a hypnotic trance, undisturbed by outside influences.

"You feel, I am sure, a distinct pleasure in creating your rôles on the stage," continued the priest presently, just as if there had been no interruption; "will not this be but a transference of your plane of action? How much more interesting, how much more real will this new method be? You can throw yourself all the more earnestly into it, without the fear of banal criticism—you will be freer, less bound down by the conventional standards, less hampered by unnatural circumstances, be able to create, to bring by your own unaided efforts results to pass,—that good may come."

"Can you forgive my stupidity?" she said

calmly, but in a dull voice. "I saw with my own eyes, now I see with yours."

There was no more fight in her, so why should she not put into practice the very principles he had advocated? It would not be the first time she had tried to throw sand into this man's eyes. Even if he found her out, he could say nothing, and she would please him by playing into his hands.

"*Figlia mia*, it is I who am the humble pupil. Do not speak of forgiveness. Why, I should fall at your feet."

Elena's smile was studied, but it was also enigmatical, yet the priest rose, and, with the grace of a courtier, lifted her hand to his lips. "Let me repeat my lesson," she said gayly, which did not for a moment deceive her wily antagonist: "I am to ingratiate myself with the Signora—to put myself into her good graces so that our friendship, founded on a musical basis, will place me on an unassailable pedestal. Furthermore, I am to sit to Signor Trefusis, and—am I to fall in love with him or he with me—that is the only part I am confused about?"

"In affairs of the heart, I should not presume to offer advice, and never to a lady. It is a detail which I am satisfied to leave to your better judgment."

"Tell me," she asked, "has the Signora a lover? It might complicate the situation."

"On the contrary," he replied quickly, "it would be possible to use such information to our advantage. In the end it will be advisable to draw these two excellent people together, and it might be wise to use this little knowledge, if we can procure it. Might it not, too, help stimulate Signor Paolo and show him how to regain his wife's affection, which is on the point of being stolen away—perhaps forever? No man will take an important step, such as changing his faith, without the feeling that his beloved is in sympathy with him."

"I quite understand the situation then," she said, regarding him with the frank, open expression of a child; "it will be like a play, and I love anything to do with the stage. I wonder where I ever got the taste for that kind of thing? Not from my mother, I know. I suppose it must have come to me from that poor father, he whom I never knew. Tell me—did you ever see my father?"

"Your father?" he asked in surprise and a trifle coldly. "Ah! it is many years ago—ancient history in fact. He was"—in hard tones—"not a good man."

"Is he dead then, do you think?"

"*Chi lo sa?*" he murmured indifferently,

"what has your father to do with the matter we have in hand?"

Father Lamian took snuff and blew his nose. Elena always interpreted this signal to be one of annoyance on the part of the priest, but he did not appear vexed now—perhaps it was to mean that it was time for her to take her departure. She accordingly rose and curtsied deeply.

The priest stood up, too, and held out his hand.

"You will not forget—you will not play me false?"

Elena looked quizzically at the white hand with its delicate blue veins, and, turning, looked over her shoulder at him: "*Prends garde à toi*," she sang in silent mockery, then ran out of the room.

"A fascinating woman but a dangerous one, if I mistake not," sighed Father Lamian, as he listened to the beautiful voice, and the refrain of *Carmen's* song dying away in the distance.

As he stood there, shading his eyes from the pitiless rays of the sun, his face seemed to soften in repose, but the cruel lines soon deepened about his mouth, and he, too, murmured beneath his breath the same words: "*Prends garde à toi*."

VII

WHEN Anna consented to receive "that woman," as she in her inmost thoughts styled La Cantilena, it was not without inward misgivings. Paul had not urged it, but said he thought it would give her pleasure to meet an artiste and a music lover. Her instinct always taught her to avoid friction with him and once having arranged for the meeting, felt a distant sense of relief.

Perhaps the singer would not be as terrible as she appeared. Anticipation is worse than reality, and the music would make the visit informal and doubtless interesting.

It was with some feeling of excitement, therefore, that on the appointed day and hour Anna awaited her guest.

She looked about the pretty room, at the tea-table on which plates of appetizing sandwiches and *panettoni* were invitingly displayed (with the spirit-lamp ready to light). Her gaze rested at last on the piano, standing open as if beckoning her to come and draw forth melodies from it.

She rose, pulled down a shade, moved a chair, changed the position of a photograph,

and then feeling that enough trouble had been taken for an ordinary, a very ordinary, visit, sat down in readiness for the coming of her expected guest.

She was not kept long in suspense, hardly having taken up a piece of embroidery before she heard voices without.

"My dear Signora, how kind of you to come," said she, rising to greet La Cantilena, who at this moment entered the room.

"On the contrary," replied Elena, graciously, "it is I who have to thank you for according me a reception which I can only prize most highly."

It was so simply said and there was such a kindly light in the other's eye, that Anna began to feel she might have been mistaken in her first estimate; however, to satisfy her conscience, she said to herself that the woman was overdressed.

"What a delight to have a piano always with one, and a Blüthner, too," exclaimed La Cantilena, running over to the instrument with the impulsiveness of a child; "the one in the hotel is so painful. You can feel for me,—oh! I have heard all about your modesty, never playing for anyone except your intimate friends, or your husband, *cela va sans dire*."

"Do you then play as well as sing?"

"I read easily, that is all. You must know that I am studying the rôle of *Carmen*," went on Elena, in the sweet, confiding tone she knew so well how to assume, "for next season, but I feel there have been so many excellent interpretations of this fascinating character, and mine is so different from all others, that I shall have a task in overcoming the prejudices of a public accustomed to a conventional standard."

"You are thinking of Madame Calvé? She is a very formidable rival."

"Yes, of her and many others. It is not easy to satisfy critics, you know, and the public do not take the trouble to make up their minds; they prefer," smiling in a way which made Anna understand the fatalism of the Italian, "to have it made up for them. *Cosa vuole!*"

"The stage must be fascinating," said Mrs. Trefusis, musingly. "I have often longed, quite in secret, to be an actress."

"Still, most of the world has a belief that stage-people are no better than they should be, is it not so?"

"That, my dear Signora, is quite an exploded fiction now. Most of the smart people at home and in London receive 'stage-people,' as you call them, on the most delightful terms

of intimacy. You see how I feel about the question," said Anna, not without a prick of conscience when she remembered how her consent in this instance had been given. "It is to me an excitement to come into contact with those who have known and breathed that atmosphere of unreality, seen its wonderful lights and shades, and, in fact, lived the life of the stage."

"That is the usual view which those 'in front' take of it. Ah! what do you know of the real picture behind the great arch of the proscenium, the jealousies, the false friends, the lips that smile and poison, the—the temptations? May you never see it; believe me, it is better so."

"Don't destroy my illusions. I would rather not be told these things. Let me see the picture with my own eyes. It is better for me to remain in ignorance of the truth; it is so frequently ugly."

"The reality is not pretty and it is terribly real—besides it is sordid and coarse. But forgive me, I should not speak of these things—it is all my fault; I ought to have known better," said Elena, contritely.

"Please don't think any more about it," said Anna, seeing that she looked somewhat crestfallen; "it is not a matter of any moment.

Come, it is already forgotten. I hope you will consent to sing for me now, and then we shall have some tea. Will that suit you?"

"I shall be glad to sing for you—two songs, but only two, as I am resting my voice as well as myself here. I only sing one hour a day for the present—fifteen minutes at twelve and fifteen minutes at three other times—in my new rôle. Of course, I have to keep up my old répertoire, but only by looking it over without singing."

Turning away towards the piano, she smiled. She was succeeding well, beyond her most sanguine expectations, being able to read Anna Trefusis like a book. Seated at the instrument she looked inquiringly at her hostess.

"May I be allowed to choose my own songs, unless you think it rudeness on my part or have some special favorites?"

As Mrs. Trefusis did not seem to care what was sung, Elena passed her long fingers over the keys as if undecided.

"But your music, you have——" began Anna.

"It is my *spécialité*."

What a dreamy lilt the music had and a suggestion, the vaguest, of restrained desire. Anna felt a variety of emotions as she listened to the sensuous strains. The words of the

song, a little Spanish one, were simple and told of the love affairs of Pepita. "So I killed him for her sake," and the voice of the singer broke, as it were, into a sob, bringing sorrow into the heart of her listener and a feeling of disquiet, which she tried in vain to dispel.

"How beautiful! How infinitely touching! Poor child, I see it all,—the dancing, the singing, the local color, and then—the end of it all. Do you know I think the Spanish music is a little too—one wants one hardly knows what. I don't like it, yet it is difficult to resist its fascination."

"Ah! there is passion in it, you mean, I suppose," replied the other with a scarcely perceptible sneer in her carefully modulated voice; "the puritanical soul of the cold-blooded Anglo-Saxon is too self-contained, too prudish to accept it. When we of the South love, we cannot hide it—it is too strong. Bah! You others, what do you know of love? To you it has no essence, it is intangible—but to us, ah!"

Elena gazed before her with intense feeling, her eyes soft and luminous from deep emotion.

Anna at first had a momentary desire to recoil, but by an effort held herself in check.

"You—you have loved? You must have—you describe it so vividly——"

"I have never loved," answered Elena. "No, my heart is free, but we Southern women do not have to be taught to love—we love, we feel, we show."

She did not know how to reply to this speech, for Signora Cantilena did not seem to wish to give offence, but Anna did not like the rather bald sentiment the woman was so crudely portraying. If, on the contrary, she was planning to ingratiate herself, she was going the wrong way about it.

"Let us agree to differ," she began, and then, feeling what a foolish speech she had made, went on stammering a little in her confusion and embarrassment; "let us, I mean, avoid the pitfalls which will wreck an acquaintance only just begun."

"And which I hope may ripen into a real affection," interposed the other, with just a shade too much *empressement*, which she checked on seeing a cloud pass over Anna's face; "but I am in your hands and," appealingly, "I have so few friends."

The first impulse which Mrs. Trefusis had was to say that the Signora must look on her as a friend, but the words which actually came to the surface were quite different, though the sympathetic smile of understanding did not fade.

"If you are rested, won't you sing the other song?"

"*Ma sicuro*. I am never tired. It is a different song, but Spanish, too, which you don't like," said she, mischievously and tentatively.

How fascinating she was, and what a glamour she cast about her! Anna was, indeed, under the spell of the moment lost in admiration, for Elena was exerting all her powers to win and please her hostess, in her enthusiasm carrying out the priest's instructions with extraordinary vim and aplomb.

It may be seen that Mrs. Trefusis was (and this parenthetically) very easily influenced—a fact that the priest had been astute enough to grasp, and, though in a measure firm in her ideals, rather illogical in her sequences.

"*Chez Lillas Pastia*," sang Elena, and then slipping on a pair of castanets, "I am going to dance in your honor."

The inborn grace of the woman, the sinuous, snake-like movements, and the poses, full of charm, flashed before the other. Elena's postures, ever changing and restless, created an atmosphere of languid emotion, until Anna's senses were on the point of reeling under their slow rhythm.

"Enough. I cannot stand any more. Now

we must have tea. I am quite sure you must be tired, for I am exhausted by the beauty of your voice and the splendid music. You are very wonderful. It is wrong, it must be, to allow one's self to be so carried away, yet I fancy it is natural—oh, I don't know what I mean!" she concluded, in some confusion, as she turned aside to make the tea.

"May I not hope to have the pleasure of hearing you play afterwards?"

Anna answered in the affirmative, as she handed the cup across the table, but immediately began to feel rather nervous at the prospect, for she felt that it was an event for her to play for a real musician.

"It is delicious," said La Cantilena, politely, "but I cannot take it so hot as you do—and I am not ill."

She referred to the tea.

"I cannot learn to drink tea in the English fashion. For me, it is a *tisane* connected with a temperature of 18° Centigrade for the sick-room and possibly a *garde-malade*, and a decided sensation of *migraine*. It is soothing to the nerves, but," setting down her half-emptied cup with a slight grimace, "I do not like it."

Anna smiled back over her cup, which she was thoroughly enjoying. "Another time I

will have something else—cake, a little wine, or an ice.”

The conversation changed to topics of more feminine interest,—the prices of frocks in Milan and the possibility of getting anything in the way of hats sent on from Paris.

“Would you care to hear me now?” asked Anna, seating herself at the piano. “I am horribly nervous, but you will be lenient with me, I hope.”

She was never at her ease with foreigners and it was this fact which made her choose her words very carefully and use expressions she was not ordinarily in the habit of employing ; moreover, she always felt it necessary to enunciate rather more clearly than she would otherwise do.

“My dear Signora,” replied Elena, “I love music and as I play so little myself, as you have seen, I shall merely be a listener ; I would not dare to be a critic ! It takes more knowledge of music than I possess—a familiarity with its various branches, I mean—to be able to criticise with any degree of fairness.”

Thus encouraged, Anna struck a few chords at random, improvising and modulating for a moment so as to regain her composure and at the same time make up her mind what she should play.

"Do you like Grieg or would you prefer Chopin?" she asked finally, unable to settle on anything.

"I am to be a listener and will leave it to you to choose what you wish to play. Let me meanwhile be silent and dream."

A transcription of "Ich liebe dich" was the first piece, then followed "Salon."

"Do you know this? Listen, it is by von Fielitz."

When the last chord had died away, Elena sat for some minutes in silence.

"It breathes of love," she murmured at last; "let me see if I can tell you its meaning? No, do not say anything," she begged, as Anna made a movement as if to speak. "It is a proposal, I feel certain. The maiden is shy or a coquette, and tries to stem the torrent of passionate words, but the lover is persistent and she yields, is his."

At this moment the door opened and Paul entered. He bowed to La Cantilena, to whom he had already been presented by Father Lamian, sat down at the tea-table and poured himself out a cup of tea.

"Do not stop," he said, as he saw his wife preparing to rise. "I wish to hear more. I have just come down from the studio and the music sounded far off to me there."

"Is the picture finished?" asked Anna.

"Not finished, but on the way towards completion," he answered, glancing involuntarily at the Signora.

Elena cast down her eyes, and then turning suddenly to Anna, said :

"I will break my rule if you know the accompaniment to Gounod's 'Ave Maria.'"

Paul started but said nothing.

As the beautiful strains proceeded, Elena forgot the size of the room, letting her voice round itself out to its fullest power, and Paul thought less of the music than of the performers, as he looked from one to the other. His gaze rested on Anna, intent and lost in her pleasant task, then on La Cantilena, handsome, resplendent, with the pure expression of a madonna on her lovely face, and at this moment a hungry look came into his eyes.

When the remarkably fine performance had come to an end, Paul, like Tannhäuser of old, returned with a start to the peaceful valleys and applauded warmly and sincerely, while his wife shook hands with her guest.

"You must come again," she said, cordially, "and I should be glad if you would make use of my piano at any time you care to."

Paul looked surprised.

While Anna smiled, Elena turned to him ;
“I shall see you then to-morrow, Signore, for
my first sitting. I am much flattered.”

The smile froze on Anna's face at these
words, but she remained quietly in the back-
ground and watched as in a dream the scene
being enacted, standing, as it were, in the
potential shadow of rising storm clouds.

VIII

ANNA suffered keenly during these days, for the phantom of doubt peered as if threatening to seize her, and the demon of suspicion lurked dangerously near.

The priest she began to loathe, and ever since La Cantilena had left on that memorable day, her last words, like a parting shot, kept ringing in her ears, while the loyalty of which the clever singer had sown the seeds came near dying for the want of sympathy.

Paul, too, came under her displeasure, for it was not like him to be underhand with her. He was at present quite incomprehensible, being more affectionate than usual, which aroused her suspicions. This new attitude, a poor copy of his old loving manner, did not deceive her ; was it possible that he was trying to conceal something and seeking to hide it under this very specious cloak ? Surely he could not have such a low opinion of her intelligence as to expect her to be blinded by such a commonplace ruse. Then again, he never spoke at all of his work, and although at no time had he taken her into his complete

confidence in that respect, he had at least mentioned it; but now he cautiously parried any attempt on that score. Anna's state of mind was a morbid one, and she cannot be blamed if she considered every one of these people her enemy.

The thought, too, of Neville, alone and dying in the mountain sanatorium to which he had been taken, frequently tortured her. If she had realized the evil net which was being woven for her own husband, into which he was unconsciously slipping, she might have felt very differently, and not have allowed herself the luxury of temptation. She would not have given a thought as to what her duty might be to her erstwhile lover, if duty in its broadest sense it could be considered, all her mental powers would rather have been concentrated on the most efficient method of saving the one nearest and dearest to her.

She was so entirely alone, so powerless, so undecided how to act, for although she was vaguely conscious that there was danger in the air, yet there seemed nothing definite or tangible to attack.

Anna stopped writing for a moment and listened intently. She rose and looked out of the window, concealed by the curtain from the view of anyone approaching from the lake.

A faint sound came from below, the distant scraping of accustomed feet on the gravel path. The steps still advanced; then the person paused just before reaching the little wicket-gate which led to the principal door of the villa. From her coign of vantage she saw a cautious head peer out into the opening cut in the hedge at that point, and immediately recognized it as that of Father Lamian.

For an instant he wavered, as if seeking to discover whether the coast were clear. Apparently satisfied, he passed on stealthily and disappeared from view, making his way, as he thought unobserved, up the path to the studio door, which Anna knew was unlocked at this hour. How often had she implored her husband to take more care of his belongings; but he always laughed at her, saying that people were perfectly honest; it was only necessary to lock up things at night.

What was the man up to? Surely nothing good! What was his object in creeping, so to speak, on all fours up to a part of the house which she very much feared he knew to be open and empty at that hour?

She hated all hypocrisy, anything underhand, and revolted at the falsity of a man who, by his own wit having become an intimate of the house, could thus abuse his privileges.

It was hard, single-handed, to fight a crafty antagonist like Father Lamian. As yet she had no definite reason to include Elena in the net of treachery which was being drawn about her house and its inmates; La Cantilena was her friend, as far as she knew, and yet she was beginning to doubt the sincerity of her motives, though even to herself she felt unwilling to admit anything more damaging against the woman. In other words, Mrs. Trefusis had the good sense to recognize her limitations, to know that she was possessed of an exceedingly small amount of moral courage; rather old-fashioned in her ways and imperious in her demands. She felt that the qualities of sincerity and perseverance might be of assistance to her even if she were given no other help in solving a situation which began to look like the horns of a dilemma.

The weak point in her character was a complete lack of executive ability, of which defect she was totally unaware. If this had not been the case, the history and the fate of those intimately connected with her would not be so long in the telling.

The only person who could have been of assistance was her friend, Miss Martha Webster. These two women had been the closest

of friends for years, and Mrs. Trefusis was hoping to hear from her soon, saying she would come to Bellagio, as she usually did at this time of year. If she were only on the spot now, she would know exactly what to do, and, what is more to the point, do it without hesitation.

As soon as Father Lamian vanished from view, Anna hurried to a window at the back of the house. From it she could see a small part of the studio above, and yet was herself able to remain concealed from view. She crouched behind a convenient curtain and awaited developments. Nothing happened for some minutes, and Mrs. Trefusis, in the somewhat strained position she was forced to assume, fancied her efforts were going to be productive of little or no result, until she heard the heavy tread of the priest bearing towards the space of the studio which looked directly down on her. She hardly dared breathe for fear the intruder above should hear her, for both windows, the one she was near and the other above, were wide open.

From where she was she could just see the edge of a small table which she knew Paul used when writing ; on it were ink, pens, etc., and it was to this very place that Father Lamian presently proceeded and seated himself.

Anna could hear the scratching of the pen as he wrote a brief note, which he carefully blotted, folded, and left in a prominent position, so that anyone entering the room could not fail to see it.

Next he took a small black book from his inner pocket and, holding it in his hand, looked over his shoulder for a convenient place to lay it down.

Mrs. Trefusis watched each movement he made. She saw that he was unable to settle upon a place to leave the book, and observed his glance shift until he looked straight out of the window.

She grew restless until, with a start, she fancied that the eyes of the priest were looking directly into hers. She dared not yield to her first impulse and quickly withdraw—as the window near which Father Lamian sat was guiltless of a shade of any description—lest those keen gray eyes of his, even if they were near-sighted, should see her, for they seemed to have power to pierce a stone wall.

Her agitation was increased when he nodded and smiled, but apparently at his own thoughts, not at her. Seeing this, she felt relieved, but the incident had given her a sharp mental shock, and the subsequent recoil

made her aware of the possible danger of discovery. When he finally turned away, she, too, cautiously changed her position, and, after waiting a second or two to make certain that she was unperceived, noiselessly returned to her desk and the unfinished letter.

She found it impossible, after the scene she had just witnessed and in her state of consequent nervousness, to concentrate her mind sufficiently to write—her thoughts would unbidden fly off at a tangent, reviewing the picture from every stand-point.

How was any one to cope with such a villain as he now appeared to be, except by opposing his treachery by wiliness a shade darker? It would not be of any avail to try and force such a man to voluntarily put his head into the noose, which should rid her and hers forever of his baneful influence, unless some means could be discovered of which the priest would never think.

After thus reasoning, Anna very justly came to the conclusion that no force she then had at her disposal would be of any avail against this slippery, smooth snake, masquerading in the semblance of a man.

Would he never go! She was not afraid, but she could not help wishing that Paul would return, as he soon must. He had gone off on

a sketching tour earlier in the afternoon, taking Beppo with him ; but as it was nearly half-past five now, it could not be long before she would hear his familiar step. All the above facts the priest must have known when he started out on what was evidently an under-hand piece of business.

She had risen and taken her place at the window, which looked out on the lake, and listened intently so as not to miss him when he descended. The path had been cut to resemble steps and edged with blocks of stone, so it would be an easy matter to hear him when he left the studio.

In the meantime she reflected that as she could not help to extricate her husband from the mesh of deceit in which he was being fast caught, why should she not desert the ship and fly to Hillary, to whom she could bring help and comfort ? It was a tremendous temptation, and she even went so far as to go back to her desk and touch the knob of the secret drawer, but drew back before she dared yield.

Before long, however, she heard the quiet closing of a door above and again approached the window, so as to hear if it were Father Lamian who was on the point of leaving. Yes, it must be he, and she unconsciously counted the steps as he descended. "Sixteen,

seventeen, eighteen"—there were twenty-four in all—and soon she was rewarded by seeing him pass, and then disappear.

When Paul came in about ten minutes afterwards, Anna cried out, impulsively, "Oh, I am so glad you have come! I have been so frightened."

"Why, what has happened? Has anything alarmed you?"

"No, nothing, only——"

"Anna, you are too much alone. Why didn't you come along with me? You know I begged you to."

"Yes, I know you did, and I am so sorry I did not go. No, I don't mean that; it was lucky I was here, for——"

"How strange you are, my dear girl, and how you contradict yourself! Something must have happened while I was away. Come! What was it?"

"Nothing, it was really nothing," she replied, afraid to speak the truth; "I fell asleep and awoke rather suddenly, thinking I heard queer, suspicious sounds. I was a little bit startled for a moment, but it's all right now that you are here. Don't think any more about it. I am just a foolish, silly woman."

"My dear Anna, you had certainly better come with me another time," said he, turning

to leave the room. At the threshold he paused, as he saw she had not moved, and, going back to her side, stroked her hair tenderly and, stooping, kissed her cheek.

"I am going up to the studio for a few minutes. Come, too. You haven't paid me a visit for some time."

Anna's courage failed her at this critical moment, for she watched him leave and listened to his gay, careless whistle with a good deal of misgiving.

If she had only had the moral courage to confront the priest or to speak the truth to Paul, she might have been the means of thwarting the deep-laid schemes which Father Lamian was on the point of carrying out, but she could not, she could not!

It was too late to prevent her husband from seeing the note, she could see it herself from where she stood, as already he had reached the top of the little path and opened the door of his sanctum.

Perhaps the little three-cornered piece of paper was harmless after all, but if so, why had the priest been at such pains to place it in a position where it would be prominent, or was it the seemingly innocent little book which was most important? Nay, perhaps one was connected with the other.

Paul appeared at the same window at which the priest had stood previously, and, like him, looked out at the beautiful scenery. He had not seen the note then, though she noticed he held the little book in his hand.

Anna felt that she must cry out and warn him of Father Lamian's secret visit, but the words would not come, and soon it was too late, she realized with a quick gasp, for his eye had fallen on the folded paper which lay on the desk-table, and he stooped to pick it up.

IX

WHEN Paul found the black book apparently waiting for him, he was amused, and he smiled again when he approached the desk in his studio the next day and looked out of the window.

His emotion had been very different when he discovered the breviary which the priest had left behind him. Then, he was intensely annoyed. He argued that it might have been merely an act of carelessness on Father Lamian's part, but knowing the man to be a Jesuit he could not be certain of his motives. A man such as he would never openly betray himself, but under the well-finished veneer of culture, Paul feared the cloven hoof and was on his guard against he hardly knew what.

The book of devotions he had carelessly thrown into a drawer of his desk, meaning to return it at the earliest and most convenient opportunity. Such an occasion as he deemed expedient did not seem to present itself or he could not satisfy himself that it had, and the book remained in his possession.

Paul was not a weak or inconsequent charac-

ter, but he did not wish the priest to think he underrated his action, and feared to give some adverse impression if he acted hastily. The present case, however, was different, totally so, and he was entertained by the persistency of a man who thus pursued the same tactics a second time. He did not seem to be aware that his changed attitude could be interpreted as a sign of weakness or yielding; the influence he was being subjected to was too cunning for untrammelled analysis. The fact that he was drifting slowly but surely showed that there was a current taking him on, but it was so imperceptible that he was not at present aware of his deadly peril. Resistance later would be well-nigh useless.

The note the priest had left on his desk the day before was merely a civil one, explaining the regret he felt at not finding him at home, and taking the liberty, the immense one, of leaving a short life of the Saints, which he trusted would be of assistance in giving the information asked for in reference to St. Anthony of Padua. Had he done so? Paul could not remember. Ah, yes, to be sure. St. Anthony of Padua! He had made a sketch of this particular saint somewhere, he could not recall where, and Father Lamian had given him an account of his life; undoubtedly this was the

sequence. Well, it was exceedingly kind, but this shower of books looked too much like what Mr. Bagot calls the casting of nets. The little volume would have doubtless shared the fate of its predecessor if an unaccountable temptation had not suddenly come over Paul, which he did not stop to analyze. Without heeding the still, tiny voice of conscience he yielded and sought out the inoffensive black book, and was soon unconsciously absorbed in its contents.

So interested did he become that he was unaware of the passing of time, until a jangle of bells from the church tower announced the hour of eleven.

"By Jove!" he cried, jumping to his feet and looking at his watch in surprise, "I had no idea it was so late. A very entertaining and instructive little volume. I must have another go at it, and perhaps, as I can't make up my mind to return the other, I might have a look at it, too. There are one or two questions I should like to know about. If it were not for confession and accepting the——"

He stopped abruptly, for he had been speaking aloud, and tossed the little volume into the drawer along with the other.

"Not yet, my clever priest," he muttered, frowning and walking to the window, where he

looked out vacantly, drumming impatiently on the sill.

"How late she is to-day!" he said at last, and then paced slowly up and down with his hands clasped behind him.

"I hate to be kept waiting. Why doesn't she come? Hang it all, I feel just like working."

Impatience, the anxiety lest Elena might not appear, and incipient disappointment, were all blended in this soliloquy, when a knock at the door made him cry out,—

"Entri."

La Cantilena entered leisurely and held out her hand, which Paul took and kept in his grasp for a longer time than he realized, until she softly withdrew it and said :

"A chair, my dear man, I beg of you. It is warm and those steps, they are steep—but steep. Ah! I am tired," she ended abruptly and seated herself.

She wore a large black hat, covered with plumes of the same hue, with a brilliant buckle in front, while her dress was made in some simple, almost severe, fashion of a dark flimsy material. A string of pearls was fastened about her neck, while her fingers glittered with splendid and costly rings.

Her parasol fell to the floor, and he has-

tened to pick it up. How well, how exceedingly splendid, she was looking !

"Rest a few minutes and when you are ready we will begin."

"Begin !" sighed Elena, removing her hat and tossing it on a sofa near by ; "and must I assume that sweet, innocent expression again ? Tell me, have you found me like that ?"

"I have found you a very good model," said Paul, rather at a loss for the right words, as he already knew her to be a creature of moods who must be cajoled and humored, for she was quite capable of losing her temper and running out of the studio, as she had done on several occasions.

"*Ecco !*" said Elena, after a few seconds' pause, during which she had been quietly studying him. "You are dull to-day. Is it that you are tired of me already ?"

He was used to her sudden and unexpected changes by this time, and did not reply, but merely smiled.

"When you are ready, my dear Signora, it would be better—the time is passing."

"When am I to be allowed to see this wonderful picture ?" asked La Cantilena, shrugging her shoulders and rising as she spoke.

"As soon as it is finished. This is merely

in the nature of a sketch, so you must not expect too much."

"You are very hard on me, Signore. I have been very patient, and you are always putting me off with exceedingly paltry excuses. You must not push me too far. . . . Beware! for I can be dangerous, when I wish to be."

"I cannot believe that; you couldn't be if you tried. To me you are both clever and lovely,—that is why I was so anxious to secure you for my principal model."

"Do you think, then, that I am very beautiful?"

"In my mind," he replied, evasively, "Spring is the embodiment of loveliness, vernal freshness, and typical of hope and happiness."

"You think me a combination of all these? If you do, I must be more dangerous than I had any idea of."

"Why do you harp on that theme? I am considering you merely from an artist's standpoint, as my nature dictates. If it were otherwise, I might be inclined to fear for myself, but I cannot divorce my art, and my feelings, if they exist, must be subservient to my profession."

"Do you think, then, that I am the same as those others?"

As Paul did not seem to have an answer ready, Elena almost trembled with something very like anger ; but, although she was more than annoyed that her advances were so coldly received, she managed to smile.

"Come; as you say, time is passing. Do you think, too, that silence is golden? It needs but that," she added, beneath her breath.

"I could not say such a rude thing."

"Even if you felt it?" retorted Elena. "I am afraid I am more outspoken. I should like it better if you were more aggressive—a woman loves the strong hand."

"You see, a physician must study his patient," said Paul, musingly, "and an artist has to do the same thing,—observe the temperament, the moods, the surroundings of his model."

"Thank you, I have no desire to pose as a curiosity. You treat me as if I were a mere lay figure, instead of a woman of flesh and blood."

"Signora, you have opened a wide and interesting subject, but I must remind you that we have wasted ten valuable minutes, and——"

"Really, Signor Trefusis, you speak very plainly. Wasted, you say? I make you my

salutation for your consideration and forbearance."

"I am sure I humbly beg your pardon. I am afraid I am but a boor at the best."

La Cantilena looked at him, but he was glancing down at his brushes in utter unconsciousness, so did not see that she was observing him minutely. Her scrutiny ended, she sighed and passed her hand rather wearily over her forehead.

For the next five minutes, nothing was heard but the gentle sougling of the summer breeze, while Paul worked steadily, alternately gazing from the motionless figure of the singer to the canvas and back again.

"Signor *Pagliaccio*," said Elena, without moving her position and referring to the long, loose white garment the painter was wearing, "will you not allow me a few minutes' rest? I am tired, and I wish, at least I have an uncontrollable desire, to waste some more of your precious time.

"My poor man," she continued, "who could be angry with you for long? Certainly not I. The world is too beautiful a place for much bad temper. It is made for life, for love, with just a touch of sadness to act as leaven and make us think of our sins and prepare to make a good death."

"Don't be so morbid, or else I shall not be able to do any more work."

"But we Catholics," persisted La Cantilena, "must think of such things. To die is sad, but it is necessary to arrive at the end of our span in the odor of sanctity. In the meantime, one must live. What would you? *È la vita.*"

"Death can only be ugly. It is dissolution—it is the end of all things," replied Paul, gloomily.

"With your narrow-minded religious views, it can be but that to you. For us it is blessed, glorious! It is the entrance into a new life, and to come to its threshold regenerate and free, absolved from earthly frailties, is the reward of the pardoned sinner who has made his peace with the Almighty."

"You think, then, that if one repent, even at the eleventh hour, after a misspent life, one may receive the reward of the pure in heart?"

"Certainly, I believe it."

"All I can say is that such a religion is ready-made. Our faith, on the other hand, has an element which yours has not,—namely, the personal one, the assurance that we are permitted to deal directly with a Being who is long-suffering, merciful, and of great goodness, but who punishes the guilty and rewards the worthy."

"It is all a matter of temperament. If you can bring your mind to accept, you will be much happier. We are taught our belief, we receive the truth as absolute, and—it is finished."

She had succeeded in bringing about a discussion on the subject of religion between herself and Paul, and in the most natural way; she could not help smiling to herself at the success of her scheme, even if his views were at present entirely different from her own. The man was obstinate, but if the priest's campaign could have a favorable termination, in that case it would be all the more praiseworthy and creditable. The end would justify the means, and the result could not fail to be all that could be desired.

La Cantilena had walked to the window as these thoughts were passing through her mind, and she saw in the room below the figure of Mrs. Trefusis pass. Turning to Paul, she said,—

"I cannot go on to-day. I am nervous. I have a headache."

"My dear Signora, I am too sorry. Is there anything I can get you?"

"No, I think not," she answered, slowly; "it is nothing. Ah!" she cried out, suddenly, "it is all gray about me—the room turns.

Dio-mio! I am afraid," in a weak voice, "I am going—to faint."

Paul was just in time to catch her before she fell prostrate at his feet. He looked down anxiously at her. What was he to do? She was too heavy to move; there was a sofa near by, but could he get her to it? No, he could not. Should he lay her on the floor and summon assistance? He was about to act on this impulse, when she gasped and her eyelids fluttered.

"Paolo, mio Paolo!" she moaned, faintly.

Presently she opened her eyes wide and stared around her in terror; but when she saw Paul her color came back with a sudden rush and she smiled.

"Have I betrayed myself? Ah! hast thou not guessed my secret long before."

Paul did not answer, but gazed into her eyes. His heart beat fast, and he was tempted, tempted as he had never been before. Could he resist the languorous charms of this woman, who lay half inert in his arms?

"Hush," he whispered; "wait; come and rest on this chair a moment," half dragging her to one as he spoke.

Seeing that she remained passive, he went to the window and listened. He could hear

nothing. Stealing to the door, he pushed the bolt noiselessly and turned guiltily to Elena.

She had not moved, but as he advanced to her side, she rose and staggered a few steps to meet him, suddenly throwing herself into his arms, with her hands clasped about his neck and her head resting on his shoulder.

"I must not yield, I dare not," he breathed, as she looked up at him, her gaze brimming with love and desire.

"*Tesor mio, t'amo!*" she murmured passionately.

As slowly she drew him to her, he vainly sought to resist, but yielding gradually, with a cry at last his lips met hers in a lingering kiss.

"Let me go," cried La Cantilena, struggling at last; "enough." She freed herself with a wrench. "I must leave. It is late."

She tore herself from him and noted the blood surge up into his pale face, while her heart bounded with a great gladness, for she loved him as she had never loved before.

The leaven was working, but when she thought of the task imposed by the priest, her whole being revolted at what was proving to be her punishment. It was the refinement of cruelty.

She caught up her hat and with trembling

fingers fastened it on and hastily snatched up her parasol. She could not help wondering whether Anna had been listening and how much she knew.

Like a shadow she was gone before Paul realized it. He buried his face in his hands as the truth of the situation flashed upon him. When he rose unsteadily to his feet he heard La Cantilena warbling in the distance with plaintive cadence, "*Non ti scordar di me.*"

X

“Ан!” cried Beppo, in dismay, “careless that thou art,” as he picked up ruefully the remnants of a little plaster figure of St. John. “Is it thus that thou treatest the saints? Fie on thee, child of a drunken tailor! Ah! but that is well done,” he continued, surveying a small sketch critically, “that is genius, if thou wilt, for although I am a peasant I know. Those colors are just as natural as the life. It is wonderful to be able to do it; surely it is a heaven-sent gift.”

With a small feather-duster the boy busied himself in setting the studio to rights, brushing up part of the dust which invariably collected. Paul allowed no one but Beppo to do this work, and even he with some difficulty had been granted the concession, as Paul had a mania for not having his workshop put in order; Anna would have wished it done every day.

Beppo wandered to the window and looked out, letting his eyes rove over the lake, the mountains and the scene which stretched out as in a picture before him. What was beyond

the green slopes and those other mountains crowned with everlasting snow? There were doubtless villages bigger than Bellagio,—where he had been born and lived all his life, these thirteen happy years,—larger perhaps than Como, which he had once seen. To the south he had heard that the great town of Milano lay, of which he could form no idea; to reach it he knew one must go in a line of carriages, fastened together and drawn by a powerful contrivance which emitted volumes of dense black smoke; he would be afraid of such a monster, for he could not understand it, having often wondered at the collection of little painted boxes as they sped like lightning by Varenna, which was across the Lake of Lecco, on their way to those distant peaks. The boy shook his head and turned to his work; such weighty subjects were beyond his comprehension. A gentle knock at the door interrupted his cogitations and he was about to bid the person to enter when a man pushed his head in, as if accustomed to come in unannounced. It was Father Lamian.

“Am I too early?” he exclaimed, apologetically, and then catching sight of Beppo, “Your master has not yet arrived? He is late this beautiful morning.”

“The maestro does not come here before

ten o'clock, and it lacks five minutes to the hour," remarked the lad, whom it pleased to be exact.

"You are very fond of this artist? You would do anything for him—for his happiness, is it not so?"

"Of course," answered Beppo, wonderingly and a trifle impatiently, "I would do anything—everything he wished."

"But are you devoted to him? You take an interest in his welfare I know, but are you his—body and soul?" persisted the priest, nevertheless smiling encouragingly as he put the last question.

"What do you mean, *padre*? I do not understand. I love him. It is enough."

"I am sorry he is not here yet, for he promised to show me the sketch he is making of La Cantilena. Will you point it out to me? I am sure he would not mind."

"I regret I cannot, as I have never seen it myself; besides, even if I had, I would not dare without his express permission. I am but a poor lad and my master would be angry if I did anything wrong. I must retain his favor," said the boy, simply, "for on him depends my all. Without his generosity I should have to sing for my bread and salad."

"My poor fellow, I will take the whole re-

sponsibility for what you call your wrong-doing. Ah! This must be it," said the priest, walking over to a covered easel, "now I shall be able to see it without the embarrassment of having the artist standing by. I can criticise it freely and without restraint."

"You must not touch that cloth!" exclaimed the young fellow, firmly, stepping hastily between the picture and Father Lamian. "I am in charge while the maestro is absent, and—he would not like it."

"Oh! I shall answer for that," replied the priest, about to take a step forward, but one look at Beppo's determined face caused him to pause and make up his mind that certainly in this case discretion would be the better part of valor. "As you like,—it is a matter of no importance, after all," he said.

"It is, as you say, a matter of no importance."

Father Lamian looked at the boy keenly, but not unkindly, and after a few seconds' scrutiny, shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Beppo, his eyes fixed on the priest with a look of complete innocence, did not move. He distrusted the man, why, he could not say. He judged intuitively that it was best to be on his guard while he remained. Not that he

feared him, for men such as he did not often use physical violence ; they were for the most part content to rely on their powers of diplomacy to intimidate ; besides, the lad did not like Father Lamian, which was reason enough for him. It suited him, moreover, to employ all the talent of slyness he possessed to outwit any possible effort at double-dealing on the part of this smooth-spoken man.

"Signor Trefusis is late now, later than usual. It is a quarter-past ten o'clock."

"He chooses his own time to come to this studio," answered Beppo, in a rather impertinent tone, with his eyes never leaving the priest's face ; "he comes and goes. Who can tell when? He is," indulgently, but with a certain air of pride, which was not lost on the priest, "an artist."

Father Lamian had seated himself and was fitting his long bony fingers together thoughtfully. "You have parents living, is it not so?" he asked, apparently out of the clear sky.

"But yes," replied Beppo, "they are both living. My father is a boatman, and my mother a washer-woman."

"And your name, my dear lad?"

"My name is Lorani, but my mother was born Massi," answered the boy, still looking directly at his interlocutor.

A slight shudder passed over the priest's frame.

"It is someone walking over my grave," said he with a smile, "but there may be a draught from the window above my head. Will you have the goodness to close it? It is always better to be on the safe side."

Without turning his head, the boy stepped to a cord near by, which was caught on a nail, and let the window drop with a sudden noise.

"My nerves are in excellent condition, but you should learn to do things more quietly," exclaimed the priest, with mock severity. "My Beppo," he continued, "what else do you do for a living besides your work for Signor Trefusis?"

"I do nothing else, padre."

"Will you come to me for an hour a day? I will make it worth your while," and the priest's eyes grew narrower and more wrinkled at the corners as he put the question.

"It must depend on my master's will," said the lad, indifferently; "if he consents, then I will come."

"I shall speak to him about it."

"What must I do and what are you willing to give me,—in money, I mean?" asked he, with an odd expression of shrewdness, mingled with the look of vacuity he knew so well how

to assume, and which his young face had worn up to the present moment.

"I shall want you to leave one or two notes for me and keep my desk in order," replied the priest, feeling that it might be advisable to keep this boy under his supervision. "The money? Well—we shall not quarrel over that."

"Humph!" thought Beppo, "and shall we not? Who can tell?" he said aloud. "It should be worth about five lire, but I will consider four if you will make the offer."

"I think two lire would be sufficient," replied the other, brushing a speck of dust from his sleeve with studied nonchalance.

"Make it three-fifty, and if the Signore says yes, I shall accept," answered Beppo, who had his own reasons for desiring to keep Father Lamian under surveillance; besides, he might pick up some information in the priest's house which he could turn to his benefactor's advantage.

"It is agreed, but you drive a hard bargain, boy."

While scarcely watching the actions of the priest, Beppo went on quietly with his dusting, from time to time answering the questions which were put to him, or making such remarks as he thought Father Lamian's observations called for. Not a movement, not a shade of

anything which might reveal his companion's mental attitude, was lost to him ; throughout the interview he maintained a demeanor of calm dignity, a childish innocence, which would have done credit to an older and more experienced man well versed in the ways of an exceedingly complex world.

"The maestro is surely late to-day," he observed after a time. "Will you wait a little longer, or perhaps write a note? There is all that is necessary over there for writing."

"Presently, presently. It is peaceful and restful here and as I am very active mentally it is good to have some relaxation. Is the Signore a religious man?" asked the priest after a pause. The tone of his voice was indifferent, but to Beppo's acute sense of hearing not natural, although it might all be due to the effect of an overwrought and abnormally vivid imagination on his part, for the priest's manner was calm and unruffled, just the sort of attitude which might deceive the ordinary observer, but puzzled the lad and helped to sharpen his wits.

"I do not know," he replied. "I have never thought of noticing."

"Does he go to church much, or is he indifferent to the emotions produced by religious observances?"

"I cannot tell, it is not my duty."

"But could you find out?" inquired the priest, quickly, and immediately his voice assumed a more level tone; "I would rather like to know."

"You wish me to play the spy——" began the lad, with a slight sneer but an admirably simulated gesture of horror.

"Tut, tut—spy is an ugly word. It is a simple thing I am asking you to discover for me, and you are trying to make a mountain out of a mole-hill."

"I don't know how to find out such a thing," exclaimed Beppo, helplessly. "What will you give me if I do learn it?"

"Money, always money," said the priest, with a look of pain. "Do you never think of doing an action except for a reward? No good can come of that kind of behavior."

"I am sorry," murmured the boy, penitently, "but what would you? I must help to give my mite towards the family expenses. We are five and the mouths must all be filled."

"Ah! my boy, pray earnestly that the sin of avarice may not utterly destroy you. It has been the curse of many and the ruin of multitudes. May the Blessed Mary spare and shield you from enduring its temptations."

Beppo's attitude at the end of this speech

was contrite and almost crestfallen, but as his eyes were raised to Father Lamian's stern ones, he wondered why he so cordially hated the man and his irritating personality. If he had been more seasoned, better versed in the reading of human nature, he would not have found it necessary to solve such a problem, it would have been revealed to him instantaneously. His instinct was not yet sufficiently trained, however, and the priest was so sure of himself that he knew just how far he dare go with his victim.

"Do not be so serious, my child, the danger is great and I am glad to see that you recognize it as such, but there is a remedy, never fear, for by prayer and fasting shall the devil be driven forth. Repent, for thy sin will then flee from thee. Repent before you are overtaken."

The power of the man's eloquence affected the lad, but such was his obstinacy that whilst recognizing the ring of pure metal, he would not acknowledge it.

"You are a bright, intelligent young man. Will you help me gain the mæstro's favor?"

"What! does he not like you?" asked Beppo, misunderstanding the meaning of the priest's words. "I have heard him speak in the highest terms of you, but the Signora Anna,"

Anna," said he, impulsively. "Ah! that is a different matter," and then, with vexation at his stupidity, frowned as he saw his mistake; yet the priest merely smiled gently, which only made the boy the more angry, but he determined that he would not give his adversary the satisfaction of seeing him lose his temper.

"Is it so?" the priest remarked, amused by the lad's expression of dismay, although the slip had not given Father Lamian any new information, but something in the boy's tone made him think that Beppo did not like him; this was what Father Lamian wanted to know. Whether it were the mere petulance of youth or some deeper feeling more difficult to dislodge, would not be so easy to discover, for he had rightly judged the boy to be extremely clever, and now his plan was to find out whether his co-operation could be secured or not, and, if so, end by turning his talents to account; it would be up-hill work, and yet he was not discouraged, for he loved too well the intricacies of intrigue.

"You had better not tell your master of our conversation," he said, smilingly, "and I am sure you will see the wisdom of not saying anything on the subject to any one else. I wish to be your friend, but—I could be your enemy."

One glance into the priest's keen, shrewd eyes, and the message he read there made him quickly decide to keep Father Lamian's council, so he gave the desired promise, but at the same time he registered a vow that he would never rest until he had seen the priest fall in dishonor. It was perhaps rash of him to give any promise, for it might lead to the curtailing of his liberty, if not of thought, perhaps of action ; but, once given, he would stand by it, and, on the whole, it might prove to be the wisest course : it would leave him in the same position as before, and would not interfere with any plans he might think it wise to make, especially if he entered the priest's service ; again, it might raise him in his future employer's estimation, a very desirable state of affairs ! To serve two masters,—yes, that was what he was going to do, but he would serve the one well and devotedly, the other—badly.

“It is nearly half-past ten o'clock, and I think I shall leave a line for Signor Trefusis if I may ?” and the priest walked over and seated himself at the little table near the window, while Beppo watched him as a cat would watch a mouse.

“What am I to say ? I must put down something to allay that boy's suspicions.”

He looked out of the window, vainly trying to invent some excuse for having come, but this pleasant occupation was not productive of any inspiration. His glance then wandered over the litter which covered the writing-table until, with a start, he paused. A small book was lying open before his fascinated eye, which he recognized as his breviary.

He was taking it up when the door opened, and the artist entered.

"My dear Father Lamian," he cried, in surprise, "what are you doing here at this hour? Not writing me a note, I hope, for that means you must have been waiting for some time, have lost patience, and given me up, as we say for a bad job."

Father Lamian closed the little volume with a snap, put it down again in the place from which he had taken it, and rose to take Paul's outstretched hand; but he had seen the priest's action, as it was evidently intended he should.

"I came to see the sketch you promised to show me—the one you have been making of La Cantilena, I mean," and he smiled.

Trefusis started, but the hand he had held out in response to the priest's fell to his side abruptly, and he turned confusedly to throw the cloth with a fierce gesture from Elena's portrait.

XI

"My dear Miss Martha," wrote Anna to Miss Webster, "it is about time that I heard something of your plans, as I had hoped to have done before this. I shall send this scrawl care of your bankers in Paris,—Morgan, Harjes, I suppose it is, as usual. I am going to write just as if I expected an immediate answer from you, even though I am uncertain whether you have yet left the other side. If you are in Paris, I wish you would get me some sort of a white hat, nothing elaborate, really perfectly simple, as I have been going about in an old Panama, and I look like some of those English girls, with no figures and with clothes that beggar description, although my figure, I flatter myself, as well as my clothes, are better than theirs; they look all right in their own country, but really abroad it is a pity they can't take more trouble, but—well, I am not writing a treatise on the second-class English girl of the period.

"We are doing the same things here as last year, so when you come you must be prepared to show us some new wrinkles. You remember the little boat which leaves here about

quarter to five and runs across to Cadenabbia, then to Varenna, and after a trip over to Menaggio gets one back at 6.30? Well, now that it is warm, a party of us often have tea on the boat, where it is cool and pleasant. We see almost the same people as we used to see, or their shadows. You know the Englishman we formerly laughed at so much? Well, he is here again. I am certain it is the same, for he looks at the scenery with that tolerant kindness which his brother or his cousin—if it is not he—used to, at the green slopes, as if they were an offence to him, and at the mountains covered with snow, as if he were trying, with ill-concealed success, to hide the fact that he was bored. This year there are more than the usual number of Germans present on all occasions; in fact, Italy seems to be peopled with them, and one hears the harsh guttural of the Teuton more often than the liquid Tuscan. When we first came here, about the second of May, it was literally freezing, and I understand why, in earlier days, before the modern improvements in heating were installed, and when even an open fire was an unheard-of luxury, people used to stay in bed to keep warm, for never have I known Italy so cold as it was then. We all longed for the sun and a view of the wonderful blue sky,

which we began to fancy was a fiction of the ancients ; but we were told it was an exceptional year ; that since the eruption of Mont Pélée the weather had been unsettled, and never before,—but we have all heard the conclusion so often that it is scarcely necessary to repeat it. Most of the English families whom we do not know sit in the evening and glare at each other. It is very amusing to watch them, as well as the German brides and grooms, who seem oblivious to the fact that they are not alone ; at least, that is the impression they give, judging from their actions. Why is it that the uglier a woman is the more patent are her efforts to attract the opposite sex ? Miss Ferguson is a case in point. You remember her,—the Scotch girl who was here some years ago, and—oh ! I must tell you what she said this morning. I asked her if she were going in swimming, to-day ?—we have lately organized bathing parties at eleven o'clock in the day, which is different from Newport, where I am told they sometimes go in at midnight—and she replied in the negative, saying she had not been in as yet. Thinking she might have no bathing-suit, I told her where she could get some fairly decent ones in the village. To my surprise and intense amusement, she said she did not think

it would be necessary to go to that expense, as she was going away so soon and might only be able to go in once or twice. Luckily she left me almost immediately or I know I should have laughed in her face, but I don't suppose she had the faintest conception of what she had said. Lady Adela Forster is here, also the Bromleys, Peter de Rösny, Comte and Comtesse de Bref-Villars, Lord Halsey, and the von Mürrrens, so we are a very pleasant party. I wish I knew where you were and what you are doing, for I am nervous about—well, about something—and I want to talk it over with you, for I don't feel capable of acting without your advice. I know something ought to be done ; but I am making a mountain out of a mole-hill,—or no, I am not doing that at all, but I am making a mystery of what, I fear, is a very serious affair. I am not going to say any more, but I hope I shall hear from you soon, very soon. Paul, I am sure, would send messages if he knew I were writing you.

“Yours, affectionately,

“ANNA.

“VILLA TOFANA, BELLAGIO.”

As soon as the letter was posted, Mrs. Trefusis wondered how long it would be before

she might reasonably expect an answer. If Miss Webster were in Paris it would not take long, but if by any possibility her sailing had been postponed, she might have to wait several weeks before hearing.

Her anxiety was relieved, however, when at the end of three days she opened among her other mail a letter from the lady in question.

“My dear Anna,” she read, “I am very glad to hear from you, and it is a curious fact, as well as the truth, that I was on the point of starting a letter to you,—in fact, I had already addressed the envelope. If you don’t believe me, examine the ink and you will find it is different and not so fresh as that inside the letter. It was good to hear from you, even if it were a scrawl, as you termed it, and too short, for I like long letters and lots of details. I shrieked over your account of the Ferguson woman. I remember faintly that there was such a person, but not that she was so dense and dull. You needn’t apologize for your friends, they all sound very nice; I know most of them, but those I do not, I shall look forward to meeting when I come down. There are lots of pleasant people here and a few shady ones, just queer enough to be interesting at not too close quarters, and one I have re-

fused to meet—even I, world-worn as I am—for she is a woman who is a *personage*, I suppose, but I consider her a *person* only. I am told she is a great swell and enjoys the right to an irreproachable position in her own country, which I hear is Servia, through her alliance to one of its oldest families by marriage. As Mrs. Whitehouse expressed it—you remember that pretty blonde and her equally attractive daughter, Eleanor?—she has the right to sit next to the queen, or some less important member of the royal family. If not that, it is some privilege of the same kind quite high and exclusive. She is received everywhere, but has not the faintest excuse, as I have said, for the life she has led and which, I am informed, she still clings to, as her husband is a chronic invalid; all the more reason for her to devote herself to making his life easier and happier instead of being what she is. Madame Raisuli is here and she introduced me to Lasca Bey, a Greek, who said one of the cleverest things I have ever heard. We were on the subject of American women and he shrewdly remarked, the wily diplomat that he is, that to know an American lady's position, her standing in the world, one must make the acquaintance of her husband and brother before forming an opinion. I was delighted at his good sense, and decided

that such a man would make a name for himself in the near future, if he had not already done so, for such knowledge of human nature would not be allowed to remain fallow,—it would be too much like permitting one to hide one's light under a bushel. There are several other Americans here, but uninteresting, and therefore hardly worth mentioning, except that most of them have very little to talk about on any subject but themselves; one woman, within five minutes of the moment I made her acquaintance, told me—a total stranger—her life-history and all her troubles. Wasn't it extraordinary? But about a good many people it goes to prove that you cannot always, most generally, tell what they are going to be like from appearances. Miss Jameson has turned up, with whom I crossed a short time ago. She, too, told me a great many amusing things—amusing more from her point of view than mine, to be sure—all her domestic affairs, the course of which did not appear to have been smooth, and various accounts of incidents, but through all the long harangue ran the principal theme of the eternal ego, until I was satiated and bored past belief. I nicknamed her “La Grande Mademoiselle,” and as there is considerable of her, I am sorry I told any one, for everyone calls her that now,—not to her face,

although Miss Whitehouse confessed to me she had almost done so. Miss W., by the way, has grown up to be very attractive,—talks so well and is so attentive to older people. Well, I don't mind giving in and owning up, she was nice to me. You will find me changed, now that I have accepted the position of a woman who is no longer young, and—don't you dare to laugh at me!—I have reached the conclusion that it is high time for me to begin to try and grow old gracefully, and I am afraid you will find me sadly altered, my dear. We have had a good deal of rain here, too, and I was quite entertained by what you said. It has been just my experience, but I did not pay much attention to what anyone told me about the weather, for I know Lucerne too well, after the many years I have been coming here, to be deceived by fairy stories, and at my age. The most ridiculous thing happened the other night. Miss Chase's little Toutou ran away,—got frightened at some fireworks, and bolted. Most of her friends spent the night, or the greater part of it, in hunting up the little beast, which we knew in such a small place would eventually turn up. Miss C. was induced to go to bed about two A.M., and even then did so under protest, on the verge of strong hysterics, all on account of that tire-

some poodle. It was too silly, and I was furious at her for upsetting us all so, and I am sure Mme. Raisuli was, too. She is a very sensible, kind-hearted woman. I have never heard her say a mean thing about anyone, but I am certain she thought some hard things about Miss C. that night—though she did not say them—if I know anything about human nature. The sweetest characters must lose patience with the exigencies of their friends, and friendship has a limit to its endurance.

“My dear Anna, I have been writing up to the present time with a distinct purpose, and that is to attempt to cheer you up, for I see you are in need of it. The tone of your letter was too sad for such a woman as you are. Throughout its pages there ran an undercurrent of hopelessness which should not be allowed to exist in your buoyant nature. You have too much good sense to be affected by any disturbing element, unless you have made up your mind that it is serious. I know you, dear, and I would trust your judgment in most cases, but all I hope is that this will be the exception that proves the rule, and that your fears have no foundation. If, on the other hand, you cannot honestly so consider them, try to bear up as well as you can, and I will come to you when you want me. I have

formed no opinion as to what is the cause of your nervousness and depression, for if I am called upon to act, I wish to be unbiased in my judgment. In that way one feels much more able to accomplish what looks, at first blush, like the impossible, and if the worst comes to the worst, one can but hope for the god in the car to appear. Perhaps that sort of scenic effect does not happen in real life, but it is encouraging to imagine that such a dramatic coup would not rob us of hope; we have our old friend Pandora to thank for that. I am going to give a very good piece of advice to you, although I fully realize that it is perfectly impracticable,—don't think any more about it.

“Always your affectionate friend,

“MARTHA L. WEBSTER.

“HOTEL NATIONAL, LUCERNE.”

“I wonder,” mused Anna, “if she would give me the same advice if she knew what ‘it’ was?”

After a second reading, she felt relieved, as the writer had hoped; the aspect of the drama, however, retained none the less a serious complexion. The feeling that it was unreal, like the nervous tension of a nightmare, still lingered, but the thought that she was dealing with problems of flesh and blood grew more

distinct. The clouds of suspicion, it was true, were still there, the uneasiness had not disappeared; but somehow, since glancing again at some of the phrases in the letter, her troubles did not seem, as before, to form an insurmountable mass, which threatened to become top-heavy and fall, overwhelming everything, including herself, under it. No longer creatures of a vivid imagination hovered near, but realities which were tangible and therefore possibly vulnerable.

She roused herself from this reverie, for she knew that it was but a momentary relief from her nervousness, and the recoil, being sharp and bitter, was ten times harder to bear.

It might be better to try and make a super-human effort to carry out Miss Webster's advice, for, to go on as she was doing, from worse to better, and from better back to worse again, was to drift into the path whence madness springs.

XII

ELENA sat contemplating various events in her life. What had she to regret or rejoice over? Womanlike, she answered the last question first. Health she had always had; beauty, too, and—at least until she had met the priest—perfect content.

Meanwhile, she was waiting for her tormentor, who, as he expressed it, wished for a report of the progress he supposed she had been making.

Why had he chosen this studio of all places? Replete as it was with memories she had longed to forget, or at least bury within her breast, it was at the same time an exceedingly dangerous place for the exchange of confidences. Surely the priest must realize the danger of being overheard, and was risking his head unnecessarily near the block.

Since she had made the discovery that her feeling for Paul was not a simulated passion, such as she had been forced to assume for other men, but a love whose purity and unselfishness amazed her, Elena's character changed. She grew softer, and there was no

repetition of the former scene, her sittings coming to an end by her own desire, as she said it was too fatiguing for her to continue. Her manner to Anna was a trifle too constrained to be natural, but she strove to atone for her weakness by badly-acted sympathy. The result of this attitude, which had a different effect on the two people chiefly concerned, was to strengthen the growing passion of the man to fever heat, and arouse more and more the suspicions of his wife.

That Paul's feeling for her was one of passion alone, and that his heart was very little touched, if at all, she was sure of; but her wish to repress his amorous advances and the moral attitude she unconsciously assumed, taught her the depth and sincerity of her love.

She was but too well aware that such a method of procedure was not apt to be of any avail, for it would not destroy the poisonous growth which Paul's desire resembled, nor would it quiet the unspoken thoughts of Mrs. Trefusis, which were fast becoming a factor to be reckoned with; yet she did not see what else she could do. Flight was impossible, for she had not the courage to oppose the priest in this way. She would like to undermine the apparent strength of his position by carefully-planned and skilfully-executed strategic meas-

ures, but she dared not take matters into her own hands and, despite his threats, act on her own responsibility.

About one thing she was firmly determined, and that was to hide the knowledge of her love for Paul from Father Lamian, if she could. In the first place, it was impossible to discuss with anyone, and least of all with him, for it would probably weaken her chances of succeeding against him for all time ; on the other hand, to conceal it, and especially from him, might in the end prove a means of resistance by giving her an indefinable sense of protection, behind which she could entrench herself and attempt to shield her reputation with a greater feeling of security than otherwise.

Her affection for Anna, whom she admired both as a woman and as a pianist, was a safeguard, too, against yielding to the man's evident desire for intrigue.

Of course she understood the priest's object was two-fold : first, to gain her influence based on religion, which was not distasteful to her under any circumstances ; second, to hold Anna in check by making her fear that her husband was drifting away from her, which should in the end tend to force the wife also into the net, the cords of which Father Lamian stood ready to tighten.

What a devilish scheme it was, and how she hated the part she dared not refuse to play !

At first she had entered into the conception of her rôle with some aversion, but this was soon overcome by the novelty of the situation, yet now—God ! how difficult the character was to assume since the truth, which she would gladly have kept hidden, was revealed to her !

Flight, flight ! why could she not dismiss the thought of it from her mind ? To leave before any permanent harm was done would have been her wish, and Paul, after she had gone out of his life, would forget and return to his allegiance. For herself, it would be suffering to be softened by time alone ; the rent in her heart would heal, its jagged edges draw together, but the scar would never disappear.

Forgetting herself that the studio of an artist was a place open to interruption, and carried away by the impulse of the moment, she sank to her knees in prayer. Long did she entreat her Creator to spare the man she loved, to save him from temptation, to take from him the fever of this mid-summer madness, and show him the narrow path once more, from which he would not easily stray.

“Mother of Sorrows,” she continued, “give me also strength. Help me to find peace

and show me the way in which I must walk. Stretch forth thy hand to me, for I am a weak vessel. Hold up the lantern of truth that my footsteps may find the path, and grant, oh! Blessed Mary, that I may not wander into darkness, for I fear it greatly. Give me faith, and that soothing peace which this world cannot bestow."

Elena rose to her feet hastily, for she heard some one coming up the path.

"Courage," she whispered, but did not turn, as she preferred not to see Father Lamian's face just yet. He could too easily read the story she desired to conceal. So it was that she failed to see Beppo steal softly in, holding his shoes in his hand, and disappear noiselessly behind a screen, where he could remain unseen and unsuspected.

Why was he so long in speaking, she wondered!

"Speak!" she cried, suddenly turning, "I——" but she was amazed to find herself still alone.

The boy, of whose presence she was unaware, was seated on a low stool, with a small table before him. On it was a bowl of some clear liquid and beside it a pile of dirty paint-brushes of various sizes. From where he sat the lad could not see any occupant of the room,

but as his sense of hearing was preternaturally acute and his intelligence on the alert, he realized that La Cantilena had moved to the door and looked out, then returned to her seat again. He heard her sigh, and wondered.

"What is the power," thought she, after a pause, during which she had puzzled over the mystery of the vanished footsteps, "which this man holds over me? If I could only learn it, even if crushed by the knowledge, I might turn it into a weapon against him! To be rid of him forever—ah!" she pressed both hands over her heart at the thought, and her eyes were bright with the radiance of unshed tears.

Hearing steps approaching from below, unmistakable this time, she looked calmly towards the door and waited.

"I am decidedly late, *mia figlia*. I humbly beg your pardon," said the priest.

"*Prego*," she replied, holding out her hand to him. "I am at your service."

"Still," he persisted, "it is a grave fault to be unpunctual."

"Ah!" she said, smiling, "would that I had never been guilty of a graver one. Most of us are human."

"To err is human," quoted the priest, "but you must not forget that forgiveness is divine."

Elena said nothing ; she was waiting for the prelude to end before the first movement of the symphony began. What would the theme be?

"Have you nothing to say to me?" he asked at length, as she remained silent.

"What do you wish me to say?"

"You can gain nothing by delay. Go on, I wish for details."

"The picture, I hear, is more or less finished. There will be only a few more sittings," she answered, unable to tell the truth.

"It cannot be finished," said he, "for I have seen only the small sketch, which is excellent."

"You have seen more than I have, then," she exclaimed, "I told you it would be little help I could give you. You are one of those rare natures which works better alone."

"What do you mean by that? Is it possible that you are no longer willing or able to give me assistance?"

"How quick you are to jump to conclusions. I do not feel capable of refusing any request you may make. I am, as I said, at your service," she hastened to add, noticing the suspicion of a sneer in his tone.

"My poor child," he answered, looking at her sternly, "why fence with me? I wish some

information which you should be in a position to give to me. It is very simple."

"I have but given you general answers to what seemed to me to be—well, hardly specific questions."

"True," assented Father Lamian, "but I thought you might be astute enough to read between the lines. I see I must be more explicit."

"You once told me I was dull; why do you take the trouble to make me any different?"

"None so deaf as those——, but I see you know the ending. *Cara* Elena, you tried to be dull the day I called you so, but it was not a success. You must make up your mind that you cannot hide things from me, especially those I intend to know about."

She uttered a low laugh and looked out of the window. Father Lamian frowned slightly and glanced at her anxiously, but with growing admiration. Then, as she looked up, he too smiled.

"What have you gained by these excellent opportunities offered by the sittings you were good enough to grant?"

"Can you not tell better than I? He has never honored me with his confidence."

"What I wish to know is, have you fallen

in love with Paul Trefusis or he with you? Tell me, I must know."

"Hush! not so loud. His wife is probably in the next room below," she hastened to add, then went on almost as if she were talking to herself, "he is in love with me, or, to be more exact, I have been fortunate enough to inspire him with a passion for me."

She stopped abruptly, closing her lips with a snap. Not a word of the above conversation was lost by the boy hidden behind the screen, but he hardly dared to move lest his presence should be discovered. He merely stared absently at the numerous brushes he had quietly plunged into the bowl to soak, before he cleaned them with a piece of rag.

The priest rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. "Ah, good, very good! She," he went on, jerking his thumb vaguely in the direction of Mrs. Trefusis's room, "I am not ready for yet. In good time,—all in good time."

"Yes? You thought my picture good?" she continued, rather quickly. "Remember, I have not seen it," thoughtfully smoothing out her gloves, which she had removed.

"Excellent,—but we are wandering. The picture is a means to an end. I wish, as I have already told you, to obtain control of Signora

Anna's fortune—for the church, you understand. It is just a part of the game, and a pretty one at that, is it not? Have you had any conversation about religion with your—friend?"

Beppo was thinking hard, for the problem was as yet complex to him. As a result of his deliberations he made up his mind that Paul, his beloved master, was in danger, not from the point of view of becoming a Roman Catholic—for the boy was too devout himself to stand in the way of anyone's possible or probable conversion—but from some other undiscovered cause which would estrange him from his wife or bring terrible distress upon his household. His fists clenched and he grew pale with anger, but he did not move.

"Oh, yes," answered La Cantilena, "and I congratulate you—you are making progress there, for he is beginning to take up the consideration of religious subjects. It is starting to be a source of worry to him, and that," smiling, "is a very promising sign."

"I had thought so myself, but I have had very little talk with him on subjects of that kind. I have often given him opportunities for study, if he desired to avail himself of them. To you has been intrusted the task of probing, of sounding the depths of his na-

ture. I fancy you have found it an interesting, if not instructive, pastime. Many things, of a delicate kind, are better managed by a woman than a man; they have more subtlety—more *finesse*, more——”

“You are paying a high tribute to women, but I have known men,” remarked she, indolently regarding him through half-veiled lids, “who for the qualities you have enumerated would put any woman, the best of them, to the blush.”

“Is it so? Well, it may be, but I wish to ask a few more questions. What are your feelings for Paul Trefusis? Are they real enough to stimulate and give rise to—suspicion? Tell me.”

“Who can say what a woman’s feelings are! Sometimes she doesn’t know them herself. She likes to drift, to bask in the warmth of the present, to——”

“Silence!” commanded the priest, seizing her roughly by the wrist; “enough of this embroidery. When you feel like trying your hand at fiction, you——”

Elena did not attempt to draw away from the priest, but her color faded and she closed her eyes wearily.

“How dare you!” she muttered, tensely. “Release me at once. Is this the time to com-

pel me to speak? Are we in the time of the Spanish Inquisition? You—devil!" she hissed.

He let her go and merely smiled.

"What power, what *verve*! It is dangerous to play with fire! Have you perhaps some Russian blood in your veins—scratch one and you will find a Tartar, you know?"

She did not answer, but regarded him coldly, at white heat, but calm, like a beautiful snake waiting to spring.

"You have a secret," she exclaimed, taking a sudden resolve, "and some day I shall learn it. The best way to confront the blackmailer is to pay him back in his own coin."

Father Lamian paused, but his expression did not vary; it was merely as if a light cloud were passing over the face of the sun, dulling its radiance for the moment.

"Better let sleeping dogs lie," he remarked quietly. "Women had better not dabble in business, blackmailing, or blackening their friends' characters. The three Bs, you see, are quite as important as the same number of Rs we learnt in childhood."

He rose and ~~he~~ walked slowly over to the window. Glancing down in the direction of Anna's room, the window of which stood open, he repressed a start of satisfaction, for what he saw there was a woman kneeling by

the sill, her face buried in her arms, her beautiful hair falling in disorder about her shoulders, and her form shaken by convulsive sobs. Seeing this, he drew back and turned to Elena, who had been regarding him curiously.

"I must go now, but I wish to ask you first to forgive me."

"It is nothing," she answered wearily. "You are over-zealous, that is all. You lost your temper, which shows that you are but human. I cannot forget, but," coldly, "there is nothing to forgive."

He bowed and left her, but she sat motionless, gazing straight before her, her brows knitted in perplexity. At last, drawing herself up triumphantly and with a certain sinuous grace, she turned her eyes towards the door by which he had gone out.

"You devil!" she repeated through her closed teeth.

"Do you hate him, too?" asked a muffled voice. "So do I. I would like to kill him."

"You!" she cried, rising and confronting Beppo, noting the convulsed face of the boy and his slight frame trembling with passionate rage. "Tell me, did you hear all—all, I say?"

"Yes, I heard all, and I *shall* kill him."

"No," she cried, quickly. "I forbid you to

do that. Come, it shall be a covenant between you and me. Let us pray for aid and strength." She drew the lad gently to her as she sank to her knees.

Silence reigned, and the lips of the two moved mechanically. The dark tresses of the one and the short curly locks of the other stirred as the door opened, impelled by the soft summer breeze.

Elena rose quickly, but, seeing no one, patted the head of the boy as he stood quietly before her.

"Do not do anything until you hear from me. I must think this all over. There must be a way," she murmured, as she walked thoughtfully to the door.

"Still," persisted Beppo to himself, as he returned to his task, "I should like to see him suffer; but perhaps she is right after all—killing would be too easy for him."

XIII

ANNA lifted her tear-stained face and looked out with despair on the smiling scene. She dared not glance up for fear her eyes should encounter the triumphant look of the priest. Rising unsteadily to her feet, she walked slowly up and down the room, coiling her hair with trembling fingers.

The writing on the wall! It was all true, then. They were taking Paul away from her. She clenched her fists in impotent misery: The blood mounted suddenly to her brow. They should not succeed. Unaided she felt she could not put a stop to it—she would send for Martha. Acting quickly on this suggestion, after bathing her hot face, she dressed, donned hat and veil, and walked over to the hotel to post her letter.

The moment had arrived when she had come to the limit of endurance. Her patience, her love for her husband, and her faith generally could not endure further. The danger she feared was that he was going to be lured away from her, and that her native pride could not stand. She had heard enough of the conversation between the priest and Elena to

make her grasp two things: one, that the singer was not essentially bad, if her words were to be trusted; the other, that if Paul yielded to the priest, it showed he could be influenced in the direction of religion, and why not then in another—towards love? Religion he must make up his own mind to accept or reject,—but love! She dreaded lest La Cantilena were insincere.

Remorse swept over her as the question came into her mind whether she had been right in deciding that her husband no longer loved her. Had he never ceased to love her after all, and had her fears merely been the spectre of an oversensitive imagination? She tried to face the situation as it had been at the beginning. Her husband loved her then—of that she had been and was certain. As his success in art grew greater, was it not natural for him to drift until he lost himself in it almost completely? The torturing thought, and the one that rankled most, was whether her conduct had been blameless. What of Hillary? The thought of the words which had fallen so naturally from La Cantilena's lips caused a wave of pity for the unfortunate woman to rise,—but were they really true? On the crest of it her memory of Neville faded. She saw clearly that her duty

pointed towards her husband ; he needed her more than anyone else, and the personal note in the dying man's letter was merely the selfishness of a chronic invalid. Was it wrong for her to do as she had done ?

She felt relieved to find herself at the hotel, for her mind was wearied by these perplexing problems with which it was useless to tire herself now, for the present case was not imaginary,—it was too real to be solved by such methods as she had been employing. Actions speak louder than words.

Having posted her letter, she threw her veil back and sat down to consult a Bradshaw. She calculated that two days must elapse before Miss Webster could arrive, allowing for the receipt of the letter, time for packing, etc., presupposing that she left at once, as she hoped she would. She gave the book back to the *concierge*, who in turn handed her a letter. The envelope bore a Swiss post-mark. She put it in her pocket as she turned.

“How do you do, dear Lady Adela? Won't you have tea with me?”

As was usually the case, tea for two necessitated many further orders, as one by one acquaintances gathered, and the waiter was dispatched several times for fresh cups.

“Yes, he died,” said De Rösny, at the end

of a long story, "leaving the woman money to buy a dress to wear at his funeral. It was by far the most generous thing he ever did."

"What an old rascal he must have been!" sighed Lady Adela.

"On the contrary," replied Peter de Rösny, quickly, he possessed varied talents, was well-read and a thorough man of the world."

"Oh! I know them, those men of the world," interposed Madame von Mürren; "they are bears in sheeps' coats——"

"Quite so," answered her husband, politely. He spoke a few words of English, but frequently did not understand the drift of what was being said.

"——which go around hunting for some one to eat," she continued triumphantly, with a brilliant smile.

"All men are not bad," remarked the Countess, glancing at her husband. "Speak up, my little financier."

"As I have told you many times, my dear," answered Alphonse, who had control of the family purse-strings, but worshipped the ground his wife walked on, "men are men, and women must take them as they find them."

"It is for better, for worse," laughed Anna, looking down, "and——"

"More often for worse," exclaimed Louise

von Mürren, raising her lorgnettes and surveying the others defiantly, for, imagining herself a woman of wit as well as fashion, she considered her word final.

"Please take care," said her husband, who fancied she was attacking some one, and in the kindness of his large heart wished to defend her probable victim.

"Women are, I think," interposed Mrs. Bromley, gently, "what men make them; look at Lady Savage, for example. When she married she was the sweetest, the most lovable—and now she——"

"Is the gayest woman in London," interrupted Madame von Mürren. "Well, and does not that prove what I said?"

No one remembered her having said anything of the kind, but it took a considerable amount of courage to oppose the coldness of those steely blue eyes, so her words remained unchallenged.

"And yet, I have been happy," murmured Amélie de Bref-Villars, demurely.

Everyone laughed, as it was well known that the Count never left his wife's side.

"Is not the danger exaggerated?" asked Lady Adela. "We are none of us perfect, but I must confess that international marriages are often problematical."

"I was an Austrian and my Alphonse a Frenchman," remarked the Countess, who did not know that Lady Adela's daughter had recently married an Italian.

"Yes," she assented, "but I was thinking more of the union of Anglo-Saxon and——"

"Oh! never a success," said Madame von Mürren decidedly. But Anna, who was sitting next to Lady Adela, took that lady's hand, pressed it gently and smiled.

"There may be exceptions," she said.

"May I have some more tea?" asked Louise, handing her cup to the Count to pass on to be refilled.

Anna sent the patient waiter for more hot water and turned to Madame von Mürren. "I am sorry to keep you waiting."

Louise waved her lorgnettes indifferently, saying, "It is the women who do not understand their husbands. They cry for love, love, love. Oh! but we are selfish."

"You may be right," remarked Anna, thoughtfully, "but we do not stop to reason; it is natural."

"Yes, I agree with you," answered Lady Adela, "for there are times when a man wishes to be left alone, and then we should use our tact to spare him."

"Women," announced Louise didactically,

"often make the mistake of trying to interpose their demands on their husbands, forgetting that they are more interested in their own affairs."

"I married an artist," broke in Anna, leaning forward, "and I——"

"Ah! a case in point," exclaimed the Countess, "but the one which, we know, is the exception."

"Again, we have to consider the difference in religion," went on Lady Adela. "I think no two people can live happily together unless they are one in thought, and they cannot be united unless——"

"I became a Roman Catholic," said the Countess, sweetly.

"That is what is often the stumbling-block with us," sighed Lady Adela, thinking of her daughter, who, rumor said, was considering the question of changing her religion.

"It seems to me," remarked Anna, "that each man or woman must decide that question for themselves. Whatever is for the greatest happiness—you see I am liberal—is the best. The only thing I can't decide is whether the marriage of two people of the same religion can be happy if one of them changes faith after marriage."

"Luckily you are not called upon to settle

that," laughed the Countess, "for you and your artist are perfectly happy."

"Happy!" echoed Anna, dreamily, and then in lighter vein, "of course we are."

"I must really be going," exclaimed Amélie, rising. "I had no idea it was so late. We dine at seven and I like a walk before dinner."

The party broke up into groups and finally diminished, until Lady Adela and Anna were the only two left.

"May I stroll along with you?"

Anna started, as she had been sitting lost in a profound reverie, but rose immediately and the two walked off together.

"My dear, I am an old woman, so you must not mind what I am going to say. You are not happy, or there is something on your mind."

"Why, Lady Adela! What makes you say that? Have I——"

"No you have not said anything, or shown that you are troubled, but I know that you are. I was afraid you were going to be indiscreet at one point this afternoon."

"I do not understand you," began the other, coldly, but, looking up at her companion's kindly face, glanced away. "Oh! I cannot speak to you about what worries me."

"Ah! I do not wish to force your confidence," interposed the other woman, "and no one else noticed what I saw, but I am anxious to help you—to be your friend."

"You are most kind," exclaimed Anna, trying not to repress her true feelings. She stretched out her hand which the other grasped warmly and held for a time; "I shall not easily forget your offer."

As she walked on, Anna's eyes filled with tears; Lady Adela had not realized how near the wretched woman had come to casting herself on the motherly sympathy of her kindly heart and blurting out the truth, the whole hideous history, then and there. Perhaps it would have been unwise to foist her confidence on a comparative stranger, and she was glad that she had held her tongue; nevertheless, she could not help but be moved by the large-heartedness of the lonely old woman.

It was not until she entered her own room that she remembered the letter with the foreign stamp and sat down to read it forthwith. It was in French and ran as follows:

DEAR MADAME,—On behalf of Monsieur Neville, I am sending you these few lines. The end is so near, in fact he cannot live more than a few days now, that I offered to

write to anyone he wished. He spoke of you and begged me to entreat you to come at once. He explained that you were the only friend he had left in the world,—so I am carrying out his desire.

Believe me, dear madame,

Your devoted and respectful,

L. BOURIOT.

After reading the note, she remained motionless until, impulsively, she tore it across twice. Why must they probe her wound and open afresh the doubt she had thought closed forever? Then she pieced the torn sheet carefully together and re-read the brief communication, sighing deeply.

“I will not go,” she said at last, slowly destroying the remnants of the note and tossing them into the waste-paper basket, but she raised her hand to her heart as she heard Paul go quickly into his dressing-room. She listened as he opened the window, threw his coat across a chair, and then, to her amazement, began to sing. Was it with the light-heartedness of the contented husband who loved his wife that he raised his voice, or was there a touch of bravado in the rolling tones, as if he were trying to assume an air which he did not feel,—who can tell? Anna pressed her

hands to her throbbing temples, and after measuring carefully some colorless liquid into a small glass, drained it and threw herself face downwards on her couch to woo the sleep she hoped would come.

XIV

"COME, let me have a good look at you!" exclaimed Miss Webster, "I haven't had a chance, yet. Nonsense, child! You are much too pale and thin. Now, this won't do, at all. As I am here, I intend to take charge. Where is my room? After dinner we shall continue our talk. I wish to hear all about everything—everything, mind."

Anna conducted her to the comfortable apartment, where she repaired the ravages of her recent journey.

After a good dinner, reënforced by a glass of dry champagne, Miss Webster returned to the villa and put on a dressing gown.

"Now I am ready," she exclaimed, stretching out comfortably on a *chaise longue* in Anna's room, "and I wish you to tell me what is going on here. You talk, and I'll try not to interrupt you."

"Let's go to the studio. There is a moon to-night, and then, too, we shan't be having anyone come in and interfere."

"Very well, but I think I'll take a wrap, for we have to go outside, don't we?"

They left the room.

"Now, what is all this mystery about?" inquired Miss Webster, as they made their way up to the studio.

"Mystery!" exclaimed Anna; "it is no mystery. Oh, it is all true, I can tell you. I know, because I listened at the window of my room, which is just below that one, when the priest and Elena were talking together."

"Well, if you heard everything, one thing is clear,—he intended that you should. He is a wise man. He can catch worms without getting up before breakfast, I'll be bound."

"After the priest left, Elena had a conversation with Beppo. You remember Paul's boy?"

"Oh, yes, I remember him, but what was he doing here all the time they were talking, or did he come in afterwards?"

"No, he was there all the time and they didn't know it"

"Good boy. My! but that priest would be mad if he knew."

"Beppo wanted to kill Father Lamian, but she wouldn't hear of it."

"Oh! she wouldn't, wouldn't she? Tell me, is Paul in love with this person?"

"No," replied Anna, "not in love, but—fascinated."

"I see. And she?"

"I don't know."

"Humph," thought Martha, making a mental note of this statement.

"I think she's afraid of the priest, too; why, I don't know," pursued Mrs. Trefusis as they reached the top of the path.

"Locked!" exclaimed Anna, as she tried the door of the studio, "at this hour?"

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Martha. "No, I shan't go down; not after coming so far. Here, I'm going to try. Where's the key? Why, there isn't one. Ah! Why, the door is open, after all."

"You take this chair and I will sit here," said Anna.

"Something wrong. I smell a rat," muttered Miss Webster, sinking slowly back and gazing about her suspiciously.

"What is it?" asked Anna.

"Nothing," was the answer, "go on."

"They are trying their best to take him away from me."

"What are you talking about, Anna?" asked Miss Webster. "Go back and begin at the beginning. How do you expect me to know what all this is about, if you don't start fair and square. Remember, I have heard very little and I can't make out what you are driving at."

"It's about Paul."

"Yes. Well?"

"He made the acquaintance of this priest, and it all began then."

"Oh, it did?" sniffed Miss Martha.

"Yes," answered Anna, "and it turns out the priest wants to convert Paul to be a Roman Catholic."

"Well, and is he succeeding?"

"I am afraid so. This Father Lamian has a ward or *protégée*, Elena Cantilena, whom I mentioned, and she has been sitting to Paul."

"*Cherchez la femme*," murmured Martha, sotto voce.

"What? Oh, I beg your pardon, where was I? Oh, yes. She is employed by the priest to make trouble between us—Paul and me, I mean,"

"So as to get hold of you, too, I suppose. The man is clever. All is fish which comes to his net and he knows the bait you will rise to."

"What is to be done?"

"I don't know," began Miss Webster, but catching sight of Anna's white, anxious face, "I want to think it over. Let me see. The priest—you make him known to me the first chance you get, I want to study him—Oh! I don't mind, the sharper the better—and this woman on one side make two against one.

We must try to have it cutthroat euchre and get the partners to shift.

"I am so glad you have come, for I am sure you will find a way to get even with that fearful man. Mercy! what's that?" exclaimed Anna, jumping up in terror. "A rat?"

"Perhaps," was the laconic answer. "I told you I smelt one. Sit down, child, and don't do that again, or you will end by making me nervous, too."

"I am sorry, dear Miss Webster, but you see how I am. I almost jump at my shadow," answered Anna, sitting down and trying to lean back as if she were quite calm again.

"We'll try to find out if we can; it might be important."

"What do you advise? Surely you must know what ought to be done, don't you?"

"I just want to thresh the matter out before I give any advice. I am going to meet the priest and I shall ask Beppo to take me rowing—I want to talk to him."

"We see so much of the priest, there will be no difficulty about that, but if you want to borrow the boy, you will have to settle it with Paul."

"Oh, I do not care a fig for Paul,—I mean that I can easily manage him. We are very

good friends and we are going to be better ones before long."

"You have no idea how much I have worried myself over this matter. I feel almost ill over it, as it is. For years I have longed for Paul to be as tender to me as when we were first married. I felt that his great success in his profession was drawing us farther apart, until I had the impression that I was standing quite alone. You see, I am a woman," said Anna, bending forward and clasping her hands together wistfully, "who depends so much on the love of her husband, for I have no other ties, and—am I misled by morbid fears, have I been mistaken?"

Miss Webster was silent for a moment, touched by the absolute faith of her friend.

"I do understand, dear," she said, gently, "and we are going to chase away all these clouds. There is a mystery to be solved and someone, I am afraid, will have to suffer, but if all goes well, it will not be you."

"You have a plan, then?" exclaimed Anna, eagerly.

"No, I have decided upon nothing, as I want to look about me a bit. My advice is to treat everyone just as you did at first. Don't let anyone and, least of all, Father Lamian—is that his name?—suspect that we are mak-

ing observations. You see, before I start into a battle, I wish to count up my resources and feel that I am armed and thoroughly prepared. I am too old a bird to be caught napping."

"You are a dear, kind friend," said Anna, her eyes filling with tears.

"Oh, that's all right," answered her friend, who despised woman's tears unless there was something to be gained by them, "just you pull yourself together and keep a stiff upper lip, and Anna, try to fool them by looking happy; nothing makes people so furious as to feel that they are not able to make you suffer. Come, you are of good New England stuff, not as rugged as I am, but you can and must show your adversaries what you are made of."

Anna actually smiled and the blood stirred in her veins, for she could not help being infected by the other's confidence.

Martha rose and walked to the door, where she paused, looking down apparently at the knob.

"Are you tired? Do you want to go to bed?" inquired Anna, preparing to rise.

"No, I just wanted to see something. It is a good strong door, that is all."

"Yes, it is strong, but why did you have to get up to see that? The moonlight is so brilliant, it is almost as clear as day."

"Moonlight always produces such queer, unreal effects, and I wished to find the key. You remember you seemed surprised you could not open the door."

"Yes, it usually opens quite easily, and I was puzzled because Paul always locks it himself. He sometimes does not come in until eleven and it is not nearly that hour yet."

"That is what I supposed, for I found the key on the inside of the lock, and it turned very easily and quietly; I tried it several times, didn't you hear me?"

"No, I did not. What do you think it means, for it opened at once when you tried it?"

"Wait," replied Martha, walking about the room.

"But what do you make of it, then? Don't you think it mysterious?"

"I don't think at all—nonsense, Anna," laughed Martha, lightly, for she did not wish to put ideas into the other's head, "this moonlight is making us imagine things. We'll be seeing them next."

"What, ghosts? Oh, I don't believe in them,"

"You had better touch wood," replied her companion; "you never known what may happen. It's safer."

Miss Webster returned to her chair but did not sit down; she determined to keep her eyes open and possibly she might discover something.

"I feel as if I were living in a book after all you've told me, and I am going to enjoy unravelling the mystery. I believe I have powers of reasoning—the gift of finding out things, you know, which a detective is supposed to have."

"You must be like Sherlock Holmes. What a revolution in the world of crime he has produced—I don't mean crime, but you understand me, don't you? It has been tried with great success several times, I believe."

"And I am going to try it now," answered her friend. "What do you make of this?" she asked, holding up a frame from which the canvas had been cut.

"Paul may have done that. He probably had some reason for it."

"I don't think he did do it. Why? Because—look here. It has been done awkwardly, and Paul is very neat."

"Perhaps he was in a hurry," said Anna, tentatively.

"Perhaps he didn't do it," was the dry response. "Just look at these jagged edges. Don't tell me it was done with a knife. Never!

The person who cut that piece out used something which was caught up on the spur of the moment. You are right; the perpetrator of this deed was in a hurry. Look! What did I tell you?" she continued, stooping to pick up a small object and hold it out triumphantly.

"A silver hat-pin!" cried Anna, in great surprise.

"Yes," replied the other. "Let us see if we can't form an idea of what the lady's object was. In the first place, why did she come here at this time of night?"

"Because she evidently knew she would not be interrupted."

"Yes," agreed Martha, "but her purpose was to do this very thing. She—for it is clearly a woman—could not find anything suitable to do it with, so——"

"She took one of her own hat-pins," cried Mrs. Trefusis excitedly.

"Exactly. She wanted to try the effect of this sketch in some other place, but where? Ah! I have it. Where is Paul's picture? Here it is—what did I tell you! The sheet has been replaced hastily. The woman must have feared discovery."

"You are wonderful. How did you guess all this?"

"Guess, my dear child? It all fits together

too nicely for me to have made it up. I can read the story quite plainly. Let me see if I can prove one thing to you. Here, look in that patch of light. The woman has been walking about in her stocking feet."

"Why, so she has ; but the rest of it—how could you tell? I don't understand."

"Yet it is clear to me. I feel, however, that it is better for you to see for yourself. You think I am making this up out of the whole cloth, and you will continue to think so until I convince you." Miss Webster here removed the covering, and there, as she had suspected, was the picture of La Cantilena pinned awkwardly in the centre of the large canvas, but so placed that it filled what had evidently been an empty space.

"Now, perhaps you will believe me, you obstinate child," she said, dropping the sheet again over the picture.

"Forgive me, dear Martha ; I was foolish to doubt you. Can you——"

"Yes, I can and do," snapped the older woman. "Now let us see if we can guess—yes, it will be guesswork this time—what she was after. Let's sit down and try to puzzle it out. Evidently," she continued, feeling her way carefully and slowly, "she had never seen it before. Why? Because your husband had

not been willing. Why did she cut it out? She could have held up the frame just as well. My dear Anna, I know why now. She intended to carry it away with her to——”

“You are really a magician, but what queer illusions this light produces !”

“Yes, doesn’t it? Do you know, I thought I saw that screen over there move? Let’s see if,” she went on, rising, “there is any——”

She paused abruptly, and Anna, who had also risen, caught her breath sharply, for the screen was pushed aside and La Cantilena stood revealed. With one hand pressed against her breast, she steadily regarded her foes.

“Madame,” she said at last, “you are a clever woman. Please let me get that sketch. What! you won’t? Well, perhaps you know best. I came here for still another reason which you did not guess. It was to say good-bye to this spot. I leave my reputation in your hands.”

She walked slowly out of the room, leaving two very much astonished women staring after her.

“To say good-bye? I don’t understand,” murmured Anna.

“Don’t you?” asked Martha, curtly.

“They say some swans sing before they

die," she said, softly, as they descended the path, "and that wretched woman is so unhappy she is singing the death-song in her heart. I am sorry for her, and am going to help her if I can."

XV

WHEN Beppo returned home that same evening, he found his mother in tears and the household in a state bordering on frenzy. A letter which had been received was the cause of it all.

"*Madre* is going to visit her Cousin Loretta, who is dying. Don't you believe me? It is true," cried his brother, shaking him by the arm.

"Yes, yes," grunted Beppo, not pleased by the commotion he found himself in.

The noise, the endless and apparently futile discussions went on until the family, each and every one of them exhausted, fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

At seven o'clock the bustle began again, the gestures, the confused talking, in which most of the near-by neighbors joined, continuing until almost half-past nine, when, surrounded by the members of her own family, reënforced by others, including two babies in arms—crying for the moon if for no other reason—two mangy dogs and several tame pigeons, the Signora Lorani solemnly took her seat by her brother Pietro's side and drove

briskly off on her two hours' ride to the house of Signorina Massi, her distant cousin, where she was to spend the day, returning home at nightfall.

"A tempest in a tea-pot," said Beppo brusquely as he turned away.

For the first hour hardly a word did the Signora utter, and Pietro was too much taken up with the horses to do so. They required all his attention, as the grade was fairly steep, and they had not been exercised for several days. The only sound beyond the creaking of the harness or the jingle of the bells was the voice of the man as he leaned forward to use his whip, and cursed as he did so, whilst his sister crossed herself.

"How far have we gone? Have we not passed the half-way point?"

"Another twenty-five minutes and we should arrive," he replied.

The wagon swayed and tossed, the horses plunged and snorted, until a level stretch enabled Pietro to pull them into a walk.

"What can Loretta so much wish to see me about, I wonder?"

"I know not," answered Pietro. "The devil take thee, thou limb of his father."

"It must be important for she begged me not to fail her."

"Who can say?" said he, sawing impatiently at the reins. "Mayst thou roast in the mules' hell! See, there is the house, the red one near the church."

"Thou wilt rest and feed the horses, I suppose," she said, as they drew up at the door, "but do not wait for me, I shall return on foot. *A rivederci.*"

Marietta turned to wave her hand. "No, thank you. I prefer to walk home."

She approached the house and knocked softly at the door.

A young woman came quietly out, made a sign for the visitor to be silent, and beckoned her to follow towards the kitchen.

"I am her niece, Annetta," said the young girl, motioning Marietta to a seat.

"But is she very ill? Tell me why she wishes to see me?"

"Yes," was the reply, "she is very ill. The doctor gives but little hope. He says it cannot be many days. My aunt is dozing now; she is tired, having just seen the priest. Presently I will take you to her, but now you will eat—see, here is some polenta, a salad, and some figs. I do not know what it is she wishes to say. She will tell no one but you."

After the light repast was finished the two conversed in a desultory fashion until the

young woman rose to go into her aunt's room, leaving Marietta to look about her. The kitchen was a small one, with blackened rafters overhead, from which bunches of herbs hung. She sipped some of the thin red wine which remained in her glass, and then proceeded to clear the table with as little noise as possible. As she was thus engaged, the door of the room by which Annetta had made her exit opened softly and a weak voice called out querulously, "Marietta, Marietta!"

She was about to enter the half-darkened room, when the young woman drew her aside.

"Stay as long as you like. It can make no difference, but do not excite her. Give in to her, and if you want help, I am here close at hand."

"Why have you been so long in coming? I might have died. No one cares."

"Hush, my poor cousin," she said, seating herself by the bedside and taking up one of the sick woman's wasted hands; "yes, it is I, Marietta."

"At last," murmured the other, in a tone of relief. "Is the door closed? Well then, give me my rosary. It brings me strength and I have much to say."

"Rest, dear cousin, and do not hurry. I have lots of time before me."

"And what of me?" moaned the invalid. "See these hands. Look at my face. Is not the stamp of death on me? I am only living to unburden my mind before I die."

"What can I do for you? Anything to make you happier or to ease your mind?" and she stroked the wan hands tenderly.

Loretta did not respond, but the dry lips moved silently while she essayed to tell her beads. Presently her eyes closed and the room was very still.

"Marietta! where are you? I cannot see you." The eyes of the sick woman opened wearily and sought a small table on which were labelled bottles, a glass half filled with water, a small crucifix, and one yellow candle which shed its feeble rays on the face of the invalid, lying among the disordered pillows. Her lips moved, but no sound came. Marietta understood, however. She rose and measured out a small quantity of a dark-red fluid from one of the bottles; gently raising the head of her cousin, she held the glass to her lips and forced her to swallow a small amount of it. The effect was immediate. A slight color tinged the face, which had assumed a grayish hue, and the tired eyes closed, while the breathing, which had been forced, grew easier and less stertorous.

Marietta smoothed out the faded, dingy quilt, and sat down to wait, her large hands folded in her lap and her eyes fixed sadly on the poor sufferer's face.

Ten minutes passed in silence, while Loretta dozed quietly and Signora Lorani let her eyes wander, taking in the details of the squalid room and its exceedingly scanty furniture. Besides the small bed and the tiny table there were an iron wash-stand, one other chair, and a cracked mirror. As the dimness of the room grew clearer, she made out in one of the darker recesses a chromo of the Assumption, a tiny St. John leading a lamb, and, nearer to the bed, a Madonna and Child. In one corner, she thought she could see the outlines of a *prie-dieu*, evidently home-made, and on its top was what looked like a book of prayer, but she could not see very well—surely not as much as before. Looking towards the bed, she noticed that the wretched candle was on the point of spluttering before it went out. Loretta still slept.

The room was close, and as it was on the point of being plunged into total darkness, Marietta rose and softly raised the torn blind which flapped in the light breeze. Outside, all was still, save when some street-vendor passed, or a child cried, for the neighbors evi-

dently were aware of illness in the house, and that absolute quiet was essential.

The sick woman stirred uneasily, and Signora Lorani saw that the eyes were open and looking directly at her. What was it they were trying to tell her?—for the lips, though they moved, did not produce a sound, unless prayers were being silently repeated; but in the eyes there was an appeal, a piteous one which could not be read.

Something must be done, but what? She began hunting for another candle, and finally found a small piece, which she lit and put in the place of the other. Next she fastened the shade as before, and returned to the bed, but the face still wore a worried look. Loretta Massi tried feebly to show her approval of what was being done, but there was something else? Perhaps the cordial? Could that be it? Once again she took up the glass, forced her to swallow a dose of it, and waited.

A look of relief rewarded her efforts, and a faint voice was heard murmuring: "Under my pillows is a packet. Take it and read it all, use it for the good of——" but the hollow tones ceased and the tired eyes closed, though the happy smile, the result of a task finished, remained.

Innumerable flies buzzed on the pane, the

room grew oppressive, but the woman waiting motionless by the bed-side did not give way. Later on she heard voices in the next room, and wondered who was there, but her eyes did not often stray from the sick-bed and she watched, as if fascinated, the rise and fall of the dingy coverlet, as Loretta breathed quickly and with difficulty.

The drone of the flies, the murmuring voices continued, and Signora Lorani caught up a battered fan with which she half fanned herself, but in such a way that a breath of air might reach the sufferer near by.

She grew restless at length, and moved to the window, pushing aside the cloth which served for a shade. She looked out, but no one was near, and she turned round again to resume her former position.

What was her consternation to find her cousin sitting up. In her hand she held the packet, which Marietta took and quickly thrust into her dress.

"Annetta," she cried, moved by some unaccountable feeling that all was not as it should be, "come here ; come quickly."

Annetta appeared instantly at the door, accompanied by the priest, who happened to drop in, and whose voice Marietta had not been able to distinguish a short time since.

"*Dio mio!*" cried the young woman, running to her aunt and supporting her in her strong arms. "It is the end. Quick, *padre*, administer the last rites before it is too late."

Marietta fell to her knees, like one in a dream, at the foot of the bed, where she listened to the priest's solemn words.

"Good-bye, my friends," rang out the strangely clear tones of the dying woman, and for a moment she poised there, so to speak, on the brink of the grave; then, without a movement, a change of any kind, the light went out, and the watchers knew that the end had come.

How she left, or when, the dazed Marietta hardly knew. She had a faint recollection of kissing the calm, white brow of her dead cousin, of wondering why she looked so much younger, and pressing the weeping Annetta to her motherly bosom,—and here she was, sitting on a stone seat some distance off, panting a good deal, for she must have walked fast; and besides, the emotions of the day had exhausted her, so it was not surprising that tears, which had then appeared impossible, now flowed freely. With a deep sigh, she rose to her feet and plodded on, her heart filled with sadness.

Ah! how tired she was, and yet she must

walk on. Her mind was occupied by practical matters as she trudged wearily along. A large wash was awaiting her, and she must try and get more work to make up for the loss of time occasioned by her absence from home. Then the tears started afresh as she thought of her cousin—dead and gone. She touched the packet which she had thrust into her dress, and sighed as she wondered what it contained. Was it some secret of the dead woman's which she could not even tell to the priest? Beppo must help her to decipher it and tell her what to do. If there was anything she hated it was the imposition of a trust: she would carry it out, but it was irritating because it was a promise blindly given to the dead and therefore much more binding. But Beppo would know what to do, and there could not possibly be any breach of confidence in taking his counsel.

As she passed the church, suddenly a thought occurred to her—she would burn a candle for the repose of her poor cousin's soul. It was a small service, but would be better than nothing.

How cool and peaceful the great stone edifice was after the heat and glare of the sun! She sank to her knees with a sigh of relief after setting up the cheap wax taper, and

murmured a brief but fervent prayer, beseeching a peaceful abode in Paradise for the soul of Loretta.

Her prayers at an end, she still remained in the same posture, allowing her eyes to glance at the rich colors which glinted in vivid arabesques on the uneven pavement, listening to the footsteps of those who came and went and sometimes scanning their faces. While thus occupied, she absent-mindedly let her rosary slip through her fingers, her lips moving in monotonous repetition of the more familiar prayers.

Among those who entered, one woman dressed in black, with a large black hat, caught and held the kneeling woman's attention.

She seemed oblivious to her surroundings and her prayers were long and earnest, while near her a tall, sleek-looking man had taken a position and seemed to be waiting, as if by a species of mental transference he might be able to read her thoughts.

A lady with brilliant red hair, who did not cross herself with the holy water, sat at the back of the church, watching the scene curiously. Marietta recognized Mrs. Trefusis, and wondered what had brought her into the precincts of a church which she knew was not her own. The Signora did not seem to be

praying, she was merely sitting there contemplating the objects about her, but without comprehension ; had she simply come to rest, for the church was peaceful ?

Could the tall man be that same Father Lamian of whom Beppo had spoken to her ; It might be he. How furtively he glanced from one woman to the other—evidently he did not lose one jot of what either was doing. As he moved quietly to the shadow of a pillar, hoping to conceal his presence the better, he was observed by Mrs. Trefusis, who flushed angrily and soon left the church. Marietta wondered what it all meant, and her rosary ceased moving.

Being unable to understand the situation, and feeling that she must return home, Marietta rose and wended her way to the door. Pausing an instant at the font, unconsciously she turned to look once more at the man and woman who had attracted her attention. Elena was still kneeling, but her thoughts were no longer in her devotions, for she was looking about the building with the idle glance of one whose mind was occupied with other matters.

Contrary to the priest's expectations, he had not been unobserved by Elena. At first she had been nervous, for what reason she could not guess, but when the priest had

stepped aside to hide himself more completely, she had peeped out of the corner of her eye. It was then that she had appeared to be praying the more deeply—all the fervor and faith she possessed were necessary to retain her self-command. When she grew calmer, she looked about her and saw the man moving towards her. Instead of appearing conscious of his presence, she did not seem to notice him, but waiting, hoped to be able to pay him back in his own coin. The only regret she had was that he, like most men of his kind, loved to be outwitted—was not disconcerted by it, but often drawn closer to the victim who had scored a point.

When she felt his presence near her, she rose and confronted him. To do him justice, he did not flinch but merely bowed, showing no surprise beyond a very slight uplifting of the eyebrows.

“You saw me, then?” he queried.

“Oh, yes,” she replied, looking at him with a veiled smile, “I saw you. The whole scene reminded me of one in an opera.”

“From ‘Faust’? You are scarcely considerate in your estimate of my character. I was Mephistopheles, I suppose, and you—Margaret?”

“Is this the time to insult me?” she said in

a low tone. "Am I not to be free even in the house of God? Leave me!"

Father Lamian brightened as she spoke. "You thought to get the better of me," he remarked slowly.

Elena did not answer, but quickened her pace, not pausing until she was some distance from the church, then looking back, and seeing he was not in sight, walked on more steadily, but still with black rage in her heart. A tired-looking peasant woman stepped aside as she went on her way, felt for a parcel in her dress—then she, too, passed on.

Father Lamian walked from the church with his hands clasped behind him and his head bent. He was smiling as if amused, but the smile soon faded. The moon rose, and in its rays his keen face looked stern and as the silver light grew stronger, he quickened his pace, passing into the shadow with long strides.

XVI

MISS WEBSTER, being a woman who possessed an energetic and brisk nature, rose the morning after her arrival in Bellagio "like a giant refreshed with wine," eager to set about the unravelling of the tangle into which the Trefusis family had succeeded in getting itself. As to whether there were a solution, she was not at present prepared to say; she must meet the priest, find out what manner of man he was, and see if he were vulnerable; then compel him or someone else to take to the siding, as it were, before wrecking their happiness.

Her toilet, like herself, was deliberate and thorough; she emerged later from her room and sought the terrace, where a table stood under the pergola, redolent with the odors of fragrant blossoms. A tray was soon brought out by Anna herself, and Martha began her breakfast, which consisted of steaming coffee, the crispest of fresh rolls, and cool-looking balls of yellow butter.

"I don't wish to keep you, my dear," said Martha, glancing up at Anna, as she put down her cup after sipping the soothing bever-

age; "I have arranged to play about by myself this morning and I know you will not interfere with me, for I have several schemes on hand. We shall see each other at luncheon and I must meet that priest; I have something to say to him, How's Paul?"

"Paul?—about the same—I mean just as he has been for some time. Sounds like a sick-room bulletin, doesn't it? I have been trying to put your advice into practice. You know you told me not to let him suspect that I—well, I allowed him to kiss me this morning—he seems to be sorry about something and I didn't draw away, at least not much. Where are you off to,—but I suppose I must not ask?"

"Oh, my dear," replied the other, drawing on her gloves neatly and with slow precision, "there is no secret about that. I am going rowing."

"Are you going to row yourself?"

"No, Beppo is to be my cavalier. I told you I could manage Paul, but as a matter of fact I didn't have to consult him."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw the boy passing my window a little while ago and I told him I wished him to take me out."

"But, Paul——?"

"Had told him he should not need him until the afternoon," answered Miss Webster, with a somewhat mischievous twinkle in her eye as she rose from her chair.

"I do hope," remarked Anna earnestly, as she turned to go in, "that you will be successful."

"My dear, I spell 'failure' with a very small f, and don't try particularly hard to see it. Good-bye, I'm off now."

Down the dusty road she walked, past the gardens of the hotel grounds with their high walls, from which clusters of wistaria hung in splendid riot, overtopped by roses in profusion, a disregard of order pervading the whole with what might be called chaotic precision. As she passed along in front of the huge building itself, she stopped to look in through the iron railings at the more formal setting of variegated flowers, the paths, the iron chairs and tables set in convenient nooks, listened to the plashing of the cool water in the fountains and allowed her eye to wander over the façade with its many balconies and awnings; smiled at the garish effect of green shutters against the yellow walls, and noticed the great *porte-cochère* and the grove of gigantic palms near the entrance.

She made her way along the picturesque

village street, sniffing the unwelcome odors to be found there as in every Italian town, stopped at two or three little shops, and then, passing under a heavy archway, turned sharp to the left, and found Beppo waiting for her with his boat half drawn up against the sloping stone quay.

"Which way shall we go? I am in your hands and I want you to take all the responsibility. Make up your mind for me and let me enjoy for awhile the luxury of what you call *dolce far niente*."

Miss Webster stepped into the boat as she spoke, supported and directed by the lad to the seat under the awning of red and white canvas.

"We shall go to the lake of Lecco then," announced he, in his broken English, which he rattled off with glibness and fearlessness.

"Anywhere you wish, but just row along gently. I shall have a good deal to say, presently, but I want to think it out, so as to be able to talk it over with you."

With even strokes the boat glided on. The boy threw off his hat, revealing his curly hair in careless *négligé* against his brown skin; his loose shirt, open at the neck, held lightly together by a brilliant neckerchief. In white duck trousers he looked a sturdy young

fellow, a pleasant object to gaze on, and Miss Webster lazily watched the play of his muscles as he pulled the oars seemingly without effort ; the gay sash around his slim waist she admired, too, as well as his general air of health and vigor.

Presently the rower ceased and allowed the boat to drift along, occasionally guiding it with a half-stroke of the oars.

Slowly they glided into the shade of the overhanging trees, Martha drinking in the wild beauty of the rocky coast-line with its miniature bays, then shot with a swift motion through a narrow channel, made by the separation of a ledge of rock, on whose summit stood two tiny trees. It was not until the little boat was abreast of the village which nestled in the larger curve of the wild shore that the woman roused herself.

"How pretty it is, and how restful?"

"Ah, yes, is it not? Have you seen the different shades of green, and are they not wonderful?" he replied, resting on his oars and looking at the shore with appreciation of its beauty.

Miss Webster noticed the fire in his eyes as he spoke, but merely nodded, glancing at the wonderful works of nature he was describing, preferring silently to study her

young guide and let him tell her of his tastes and feelings.

"What dear, delicious children these people of the sun are," she thought, as he turned towards the opposite shore.

"Yonder is the *fume di latte*," he continued, pointing out a tiny foaming waterfall, "and that," indicating a village near, "is Varenna, where the *treno* passes on its way to the great mountains."

"A child of nature, but with a depth of apprehension of its beauties, and intelligent, too," she murmured; then aloud, as Beppo looked at her, "Oh, yes, I see; and where is the little steamboat going?"

"Oh, that one just starting? Why, to Menaggio," he exclaimed, surprised at her ignorance; but Martha merely smiled, as she was enjoying herself and learning to read the transparent page before her without effort.

What a combination of delightful realities was comprised in this one being—health, youth, artistic sensibilities, and the desire to follow the path stretched out before him in a thin winding line up the hill of life! Such a nature was buoyant, full of the joy of mere existence, and yet there must be a layer beneath the surface, something deeper, which she had not fathomed. He was an extraordinarily interesting problem,

was *unhappy* but *efficiently* assisting. The *transformation* of a *wild* pool to wish to *know more* of. Such a *series* of *splendid* *possibilities* would make the boy one to be *desired* as a *friend*, but *feared* as an *enemy*: *no, not feared*, for in her opinion Beppo could be *controlled*, but he might be useful as an *insect* is, which by its persistency annoys, rather than does serious damage.

"Beppo!" exclaimed Martha, suddenly, "I wish to talk to you about your master."

She was a little taken aback at the opposition she detected in the lad as she looked up at him. There was a sudden closing of the lips, a straightening of the lines of the face, which had previously been soft and pliable, as well as an expression in his eyes, like the leaping of an inward fire to the surface, an indefinable stoppage of the gateway of sympathy, which made her aware of the wisdom of speaking out plainly and quickly.

"Do not misunderstand me, my boy. I am his friend, and together we must save him."

"You must get rid of the priest then," was the answer. "I do not like him. Is that strange? I am a Catholic, but he is a Jesuit, and I do not trust him. You too have priests in your country who are not good men, is it not so?"

"Yes, I suppose so. It may be. Tell me all you know and what you think best to be done?"

Beppo's story coincided with Anna's version but supplied some links which had been previously wanting.

"You think La Cantilena is afraid of him, but why?"

"I don't know that, but whatever it is, it is not her fault."

"Why do you say that? You shouldn't attack anyone unless you are sure of your facts."

"We haven't come to facts yet," was the quick reply. "We shall know better where we stand when we do, and I am not making attacks on anyone as far as I know."

"What you say may or may not be true. Well, suppose that it is; what I want to know is if you believe in me and whether you will do all in your power to help push this man to the wall."

"To the wall," he repeated softly, but with an undertone of deepest meaning, "then to have five or six *bersaglieri* to shoot him all at once? No," he cried fiercely, "he deserves to be tortured; perhaps that would make him squirm."

"What do you mean? Is he human after

all, and has he a vulnerable place, like 'Siegfried?'—but you don't know about him."

"No, who was he?"

"He was a man, a hero, who was killed by strategy, but never mind. Answer my questions first."

Before replying, the youth subjected her to a rigid scrutiny.

"Yes," he answered at last, "I do believe in you and I will help you all I can."

"Very well, that is a bargain, like the Brotherhood of Blood compact in the 'Götterdämmerung.'"

"Blood? I do not understand. Tell me what you mean. Who is this hero and what of the compact?"

Miss Webster smiled, but complied with his request and began the story of the Nibelungen treasure, the fate of those connected with it, and the final downfall of the ancient gods. The different emotions produced by its recital were reflected in the boy's face like a mirror, and he cried out excitedly at its conclusion.

"Now you understand me. You see it is more than a bargain—that is a cold way of expressing it. What is to be done? I wish to know what you think."

"Eh! Santa Maria! I can crack most

nuts with my teeth, but it is difficult to say what we must do to trip him up. I will tell you everything I hear and we shall see what we shall see."

"You think there is nothing to be done at present, and so do I. We must watch and wait."

"It is hard to catch a man like that sleeping," continued Beppo, slowly. "I remember a fairy story my mother told me once. There was a magician and he could only be caught by strategy. He lived under the form of a cat and the way the man, a young prince, could get rid of him was to step on his tail, and then the magician would be in his power. We must step on the priest's tail."

Miss Webster could not help laughing, but checked herself as she noticed a shadow pass over the boy's face. For fear of hurting his feelings, she asked as solemnly as she could whether he thought the priest had a tail.

"Yes, *certamente*, he has one. All devils have."

"Beppo, you must not say such things. I cannot prevent you from thinking them, of course, but it is better not to tell me. When I was younger, I was taught not to use such strong, such decided expressions,—but I don't

want you to think I am reading a lecture, and so I won't say any more."

"I am sorry, please pardon me. Shall I turn now?"

"Yes, it must be late and I am beginning to be hungry, but don't take what I said too much to heart. I feel strongly about things, and perhaps I am foolish."

"You did not know, perhaps, that I am working for the priest as well as for the Signor Trefusis?" remarked Beppo, after a pause, during which he pulled several strokes, using more strength than he had at first exerted, for he did not want Miss Webster to be late for luncheon.

"No, I did not. Why are you doing that?"

"Oh, to see if I could pick up any information which might be useful."

"Excellent, and have you been able to find out anything yet?"

"No, but I keep my eyes open just the same."

"Do you know I think you are rather sly? I am learning more about you every minute, Beppo."

"Have I done wrong, Signorina? I must not do anything wrong, must I? It would not help and it might do harm."

"Indeed you have not," she replied. "I think it a very good idea and I hope you may be successful, that is all."

The boat danced through the water, the boy pulling long strokes and Miss Webster, now that part of her self-imposed task was finished, determined to enjoy to the full the remainder of her outing. She tried to dismiss disturbing matters from her mind and idly admired the scenery in changing pictures. In a few moments they turned the point on the homeward stretch and she could see in the distance across the lake of Como, Cadenabbia, from which numerous boats were putting out, some towards Varenna and others to Bellagio. Several naphtha launches passed, and larger craft, queer heavy-looking barges with great sails, poled along by rough, unkempt sailors, steamers of small size and larger ones, crowded with tourists, some decorated with flags and resounding with merry bursts of music.

"That is an excursion," said Beppo. "There are many of them at this season and more later."

"You mean those steamers with the flags on them? How did you know what I was thinking of?"

"I saw you looking at them," he answered

wonderingly. "It is very simple. Does it not look gay?"

"No, I think it must be horrible. Such a crush! No place to sit and everyone pushing and crowding. I can't say I would fancy it at all. Here we are. Now, don't forget what I told you. Remember, it is more than a mere agreement."

"I will not forget, you may be sure," he answered, smiling and pocketing the coin which Miss Webster had given him.

She passed on, walking slowly up the stone steps, crossed the road and entered the hotel grounds. She looked about, but could not see Anna anywhere, so seated herself on one of the veranda chairs, where great blinds kept out the rays of the sun, took out her knitting from the black reticule she was rarely without, and waited. Presently she heard some one speaking to her.

"Is not this Miss Webster?" said a pleasant English voice. "I have been hesitating as to whether I should come over to speak to you or wait for Anna to make us known to each other."

The two ladies shook hands and Miss Webster remarked that she knew she must be speaking to Lady Adela Forster.

"Yes, I am she, but how did you know? I

knew you at once, for Mrs. Trefusis has described you too accurately for me to have made any mistake ; then, too, she told me she was expecting you last night. Are you rested after your journey? That is so nice. I hope I shall see something of you."

"Don't go, please," said the other, as she saw her preparing to rise. "I am waiting for Anna now, and I don't think the gong has sounded."

"I am worried about Anna Trefusis," said Lady Adela, bluntly ; "she has something on her mind. I wish you could find out what it is, for I have taken a great fancy to her and I cannot help feeling sorry because she is not happy."

"Oh, I don't think it is anything serious," answered Miss Webster, guardedly, as she did not feel like discussing her friend's troubles with a complete stranger, "but it is kind of you to take an interest. I have known her for years and am very fond of her."

"It may not be serious, but she does not look fit, and seems more nervous than she should be,—but here she is and I must be off. I don't want it to look as if we had been plotting for I am not at all clever at hiding my feelings. I shall hope to see you later, after luncheon," she concluded, as she moved away.

Anna looked somewhat elated as she approached, and Miss Webster was puzzled to account for it.

"Have you had a pleasant morning?" asked Anna.

"Yes, delightful," was the reply. "That boy is splendid and he is my friend for life—he will be a useful"—lowering her voice—"conspirator. And you?"

"I? I just met a certain person and he will have coffee with us later. I pray you may be able to pump him successfully. Here is Paul, and there goes the gong. Let's go in to luncheon, I am almost famished."

Martha rose and followed Paul and Anna, looking at them curiously as they preceded her into the hotel.

XVII

"Do you know I have heard a great deal about you from Mr. Trefusis?" remarked Miss Webster to Father Lamian, whom she had just met.

Hardly listening to his polite rejoinder, she studied the man beside her.

"It is very warm here," she managed to remark presently, for she felt the charm of the priest's personality, as he had not yet shown his fangs; "let us go over to that bench, it is in the shade, and I hope we may be able to catch a whiff of that cooling breeze."

"But had you finished your coffee?" he asked, as he followed her across the garden.

"What sharp eyes you have!" she laughed over her shoulder at him.

"The better to see you with."

"I do not think you a wolf in sheep's clothing, but I am getting mixed, I am afraid. You will think me a very stupid, ignorant person if I go on, so I had better stop."

"On the contrary, I am much interested. Will you not tell me something of your tastes, your aims? You see, I am tempted to know more of you."

"I am sure of it," thought Miss Webster, but aloud she said, "My aims, my tastes? Oh, I am afraid such a banal list as I would give might bore you."

"On the contrary," he replied, quickly. "I have told you the truth. You are not an easy problem to solve, but like all such, the more desirable—just as a book which is full of surprises and unseen depths is more interesting than the meaningless stories we find in some of the newspapers."

Had he intended, she wondered, to be guilty of bathos when he made such a speech, or was he merely temporizing until he should be led up to? Did he suspect her motives already, or was it merely self-consciousness on her part which made her feel that he was probing her more than she found pleasant?

"My dear Father Lamian, believe me, I am not complex. I have no depths, I am only a very ordinary person with simple tastes and no aims, except those which lead to contentment. I have but one desire, and that is to make those I care for—and they are not many—happier, if I can."

"A ministering angel, in fact," he answered gently. "What can be more in accord with the hope of leading a model life. To help others, and in so doing to be contented, is a

simple and beautiful rule. Would that we all could find happiness by such charitable and kindly methods."

"But you," said she, "have artistic sensibilities, knowledge of matters pertaining to painting, music, and the refinements of life, which, added to your other attainments, make you both interesting and instructive. You see, I have heard your praises sung by both my friends."

"You are staying at the Villa Tofana, I believe? It is a privilege for me to be received in such a friendly way by cultured people."

Miss Webster began to weary of this preliminary fencing; it was like the compliments which duelists believe necessary before they actually begin to fight. She looked at the priest, and he, smiling, looked quietly back at her. What was there in that smile which was disconcerting and subtly irritating? It was the first intimation that she had received of the nature which lay beneath the polished surface, and it made her realize that all her powers of diplomacy would be needed to fathom it.

Without appearing to retreat before his rather searching gaze, Miss Webster allowed her glance to drift away in the direction of the lake, though she still listened to what he was saying. A cat passed along the low stone

balustrade on which the iron railing rested, and she watched it pick its way along, stepping over the vines and rose-bushes with lazy care and precision. It was black, with a patch of white fur on the breast, and she smilingly hoped it might prove an omen of good luck ; but alas ! she did not believe in those senseless superstitions. However, though she rejected it, she could not help feeling that it might be a sign that all would go well.

“Yes, they are charming people, as you say,” she replied, forcing herself to pay attention to what he was saying. “But Anna does not look well. I wonder what is the matter ; do you know ? I ask you because you have seen a great deal of them lately, and I must confess I am anxious about her.”

Father Lamian did not at once respond and Miss Webster looked at him inquiringly. His face was expressionless and he was glancing down, apparently at his hands, which were folded calmly before him. She could read nothing there. Did he seem conscious that the tocsin had sounded and the first gun of battle wheeled into position, or was he reckoning up the force at his disposal ? Perhaps he was waiting for her to make a more definite attack before he brought his men into position. She was on the lookout for masked batteries,

as modern warfare is complex, with hidden mines, powerful destroyers, the imposing numbers of the enemy, and those means of attack which now take the place of the older and more primitive methods.

"Oh, you must not allow yourself to be worried about her. She, like all sensitive natures, grows morbid at times. An over-vivid imagination is the curse of our present system of civilization. There is nothing to be anxious about, nothing, I feel sure."

Was it thus that he would try to silence her guns! "Not so fast," she thought, a slight sneer appearing for an instant on her face—she, however, disguised it hastily by biting her lip and letting the teeth as quickly relax, so that the result was a faint smile.

"You are right," she answered, trying to play a part; "I am so fond of my friends that I believe I do imagine things and impossible situations. Yes, Anna is morbid, I suppose. Still, if anyone ever did attempt to make her unhappy, they would have to reckon with me, that is all."

Boom! Boom! How the big gun reverberated through the valley! But Miss Webster either had not her range established or her aim was not true, for the face of the priest emerged from the smoke calm and serene

with, she fancied, a tinge of ironical mockery, which it angered her to see. She controlled her temper by an effort and smiled. No wonder poor Anna was afraid of this man! He was a dangerous person, but as Miss Webster had no fear, she did not allow herself to lose patience; indeed she still hoped to be able to find means to outwit him. Every person has some weak point; there is no exception, as her experience taught her, and she must find out his. If she found it, if she ever did, she would know what to do with the power thus gained, and a sudden inspiration to use it for good as well as evil made her smile more real and sincere.

"Father Lamian," she said, after a pause, "do you think Paul Trefusis will be made happier by a change of faith? Is it right for you to try to separate husband and wife?"

Perhaps the teeth were clenched beneath the thin red lips, perhaps the lips themselves were pressed together a little more tightly, but otherwise the priest seemed unruffled.

"He was so happy before, but already the heaven is working. He does not know how seriously he is considering this question," she continued earnestly, but there was nothing beyond a faint gleam in the man's eyes as he listened quietly.

"If it is for his good I should be the last person to stand in his way, but it will separate them, for her religion means so much to her, you don't know how much."

"I am convinced that you are wrong. She will not like it, but she will end by following her husband."

"I have been somewhat interested in the question myself lately," she began, looking down, while a faint color appeared in her cheeks. She did not attempt to disguise the fact for she contended that any emotion she might show could be read in two ways—either that she was deliberately telling a lie, or else speaking of a subject so near her own heart that it caused her emotion to approach it. He was at liberty to decide which it was. "I wish you could help me to know what is right."

Miss Webster tried to speak calmly and quietly, for she did not wish to give him an inkling of how confused and excited she was by her temerity and this display of courage, which was indeed the strength born of despair.

"I shall be glad to give you any books you may need——"

"I do not want books," she exclaimed.

"Not want books!" was his somewhat startled reply. "My dear lady, I do not attempt to make converts. You misunder-

stand me ; but I shall be glad to clear up any doubts you may have. We have books, excellent ones I can assure you, which would be of great help to you."

"Yet you are trying to convert Paul," she retorted, "and you hope that his wife will follow so that you may obtain control of her fortune. You knew she had money of her own? I thought so," losing her temper as the priest nodded, "and I wish there were some legal means to prevent you."

"But there are none," he replied, coldly.

"Then I don't suppose there is anything else to be said except this,—Beware of the day of retribution!" she said, as she moved away.

He turned pale. Where had he heard those words before? Ah! Elena, of course—yet there was a ring of fatality about them now which he did not like.

"Miss Webster," he said, "we have agreed to disagree, but I must say that I admire your courage in speaking out so plainly. If you are in earnest on the subject of religion, I shall be glad to give you all the assistance I can."

"You are more than kind," she said, acridly, "but you must see that it is war to the knife between us."

"As you please," he answered, "but I am

your friend if you wish it. You are sharp but I am sharper. Think what a combination we should make."

She did not make any answer to this, save that it was time they joined the others, and walked on while he followed, smiling, eternally smiling.

"What have you two been talking about for such a long time?" asked Madame von Mürren. "It must be delightful to have an *affaire* with a priest—so novel, and no confession afterwards. I once had a friend who had a flirtation—oh, but a serious one!—with a monsignore, and she told a friend of mine he was *so* fascinating."

"I never knew that the Church permitted such levity," exclaimed De Rösny, with mock seriousness. "You should have told me, some of you,—it has been a great shock."

"I am afraid the *padre* does not approve of our joking," murmured Madame de Bref-Villars, "he looks quite severe."

"Please let us spare his feelings," assented Lord Halsey, "and choose some other topic. Now, Miss Webster, what were you talking about? Excuse our intense curiosity, but then, you see, we must know."

"We were talking merely of what tastes we had in common," she answered quietly, having

almost regained her composure. "It goes without saying that we agreed on some points, while on others we didn't."

"How much the same as my friend and the monsignore!" cried Louise von Mürren. "Typical—so alike are all men."

"Don't you place priests on a higher plane than ordinary men of the world?" asked Bromley.

"I put them all on the same footing, only the priests are more ordinary. Oh, I have heard tales of those monasteries—such tales! Why, it is an exploded theory that monks leave all thoughts of a naughty world behind them. Renounce the world and the flesh or the devil? Perhaps the world for form's sake, the flesh, never; whilst the devil they pass by on the other side, and bow to for safety as they hurry on. Fudge and rubbish!" she cried in derision.

"My dear, oh, my dear," exclaimed her husband (only he pronounced it 'teer'), "be careful or you will make some one sorry."

"And what is your opinion?" asked Peter, maliciously, of Father Lamian.

"I am afraid I have not been listening to what has been said. Lady Adela and I have been comparing notes on a life of St. Paul we both have been reading."

Amélie de Bref-Villars smiled encouragingly at the assembled company, but no one seemed anxious to enlighten the priest.

"Men, of course, are all alike," continued Madame von Mürren, blandly, "perfect weather-cocks, changing with every wind. It is absurd to call them the stronger sex, for the minute they see a new and pretty face they are off in pursuit. It is the love of the chase. What would you? It comes from the habits of the primitive man. Adam was virtuous because there was no other woman. Eve must have been an excellent 'hausfrau,' as we say, but dull, insufferably dull. Poor Adam, it was not strange that he took the apple gladly from his wife,—he must have been delighted to receive a new sensation. The garden of Eden, I suppose, was like a mountain hotel,—fine in good weather, but when it rained, oh, I am certain it rained there sometimes, and even the angel with the flaming sword must have then been a pleasant diversion."

"Yes, I agree with you," assented the Countess Amélie; "men are like that and then they are selfish. Isn't it so? Speak up, *mon petit choux*," she cried out to her husband, pinching his ear playfully.

"*Mon ange*," he exclaimed, "I am not

going to agree with you. Life is life and it is natural to drift with the current."

"I think you are very hard on us," said Halsey, yawning; "at least I would think so if I thought you meant it."

"But I do, every word of it," answered Louise, with a frown.

"Not a word, my sweet," remarked her husband with a fatuous smile. "You never turned a hair when you discovered me having supper with that little dancer from Berlin."

"Little?" she replied, "a mass of flesh! Oh, if that amused you, it could do no harm. She was too stupid to be dangerous."

Alphonse did not seem moved by his wife's words, for he laughed heartily at her attack, his huge shoulders shaking with mirth.

"But where is the priest?" asked Miss Webster. "Lady Adela, you were talking to him last,—when did he go?"

"I am sure I cannot tell. He was quiet for a long time after we had finished our conversation and it must have been while I was talking to Mrs. Trefusis that he slipped away. A very attractive man, and so intelligent, I found him."

"Yes, he can be when he wishes," remarked Anna, looking at Martha, furtively. "He is the most versatile man I know."

"Indeed he is," assented her ladyship, serenely, "and more than that, extremely clever and well-informed. I never thought I could endure a Romanist; but then he is so much a man of the world, so polished, and so brilliant."

"Could you see beneath the surface?" inquired Miss Webster, caustically. "But perhaps you didn't try to. It is just as well, for he is like a splendid specimen of fruit with the bloom on it which attracts and seems full of the essence of human sympathy. You cut it open and find the worm crawling at the core."

"Miss Webster!" cried Amélie, with a shiver, "what a fearful picture! I cannot believe you are right, for to me he has charm and an interesting personality, which is the side I prefer to look at. No, you must not shatter my ideals."

"I never could bear to have my ideals thrown down," broke in Peter, abruptly, "but I agree in the main with Miss Webster. It is a case, I confess, of Dr. Fell, for I have no tangible reason for thinking as I do. My friends, I do not wish to break up this charmed circle, but I must have my siesta, so I am off. Au revoir,—we shall meet at tea, I suppose?"

On the way home, Anna asked Martha a question.

"Why do you suppose Paul left so soon after luncheon?"

"My dear, I can't imagine," was the somewhat absent-minded response.

"I am afraid it is because he is beginning to hate me," said Anna, her lip trembling a little. "You see how absorbed he is; why, he made no attempt to say anything and went away in such a sudden manner, I am sure others noticed it."

"He was probably thinking of his picture. You know artists are not supposed to be like other people. Come, my dear, you must not allow yourself to be morbid. You imagine much more than is actually the case."

"Perhaps I do," was the answer, accompanied by a sigh, "but I wish we could go away from here. I feel as if nothing were being done to put an end to all this fiasco, and I am beginning to be disheartened and to lose courage."

"Nothing done? Why, what have I been doing? No, not now—you shall hear about it all, later.

"I don't mind Paul becoming a Roman Catholic, if it will make him happier; you see, I have thought it all out, but——"

"But what?" asked Martha.

"If it would only make him love me a little more."

"Don't you bother about it," counselled Martha. "It is a bad state of affairs, but perhaps something will turn up."

"Well, I wish it would," said Anna, fiercely. "Nothing will help, it seems to me."

"Of all the unkind speeches, that is the most ungrateful. Anna, you are a child, nothing but a child, or else I would be really angry at you."

"Forgive me, Miss Martha, I am so sorry, but I am so unhappy I hardly know what I am saying."

"Nonsense!" was the gruff reply, although Martha, who was trying to take a fair-weather view of the situation, found it hard to feel satisfied that all was going well.

"Where do you suppose the priest went?" asked Anna, as they reached the gate of the villa.

"I don't know, and I don't care; but I'll tell you one thing, Mrs. Paul Trefusis,—I am going up to take about forty winks while I get my brain cleared up, and then I'll talk to you."

"A good idea. I shall try to do the same. I feel fagged out."

XVIII

FATHER LAMIAN returned to his study, and seating himself at his desk, buried his face in his hands, feeling somewhat discouraged. His conversation with Miss Webster had upset him more than he dared confess, but now, as he thought over the situation as it actually existed, he felt there was no cause for such alarm, except that he had not seen Paul for a few days and did not know whether to look on that as a good sign or not. Sooner or later he must come to a decision, and the priest realized that it could do no good to hasten matters. A great deal had already been done and the way must be planned before it could be prepared for paving.

Waiting was hard, and apparent inaction still more difficult to contend with, but, deep student of human nature that he was, he felt convinced that the fine web he was spinning would be dissipated by over-conscientiousness, and caution tempered by patience was the wiser course.

Having arrived at this introspective point, he should have been satisfied to rest, but his mind was troubled, for deep within him there

was a mire of rank superstition into which he occasionally floundered, saving himself from actually sinking therein by clinging firmly to the principles of his faith. Miss Webster's words, which had sounded like a knell of fate in his ears, drew him to the marsh which lay near the quicksand, and hastily he dropped upon his knees, his lips murmuring rapid prayers as if by rote.

A sharp, decisive knock interrupted his devotions. He rose abruptly and bade the visitor enter.

The door was pushed open and Paul Trefusis stood before him. On his face was written the story of a strong resolution, as well as the trace of an inward struggle. He advanced quickly to the desk and rested his hand, which trembled slightly, on it. The priest noticed the pale, earnest face, but did not have to urge him to speak, as before he could make a movement the young man began,—

“Father, I have come to say that it is my desire to receive instruction. I wish to prepare myself for baptism so as to become a member of your Church.”

The priest heard the long-desired words spoken as if he were in a dream ; indeed, he wondered if it were merely a trick of the

imagination. As he took in their significance he knew he must not show too great joy, and bowed his head to hide the great happiness which rose within him. When he looked up his face was calm, and with a gentle smile he motioned Paul to a seat, while he resumed his former position at his desk.

"You are quite certain that it will be for your happiness? Your mind is fully made up, I hope, for after you have once been received into the protecting arms of our Mother Church, there must be no faltering, no doubt, and no looking back. Regret must give way to faith and your footsteps, firm and steadfast, turn towards your Creator."

"Quite sure, Father. When I once make up my mind, I am certain," was Paul's firm reply.

"You have a long road to travel, but if you will trust in me, it need not be a hard one."

"But how long must it be before I can join the Church?"

"Your preparation should be thorough, my son. In six months you will be ready for baptism. That is the shortest time I can allow."

"Six months!" exclaimed Paul, in some consternation. "So long as that? Could you not in any way make it shorter?"

"Possibly, but I cannot promise. It would depend on a special dispensation from the Holy Father, and that will take a little time to procure, providing it be possible to have it granted. Of course I should have to show cause in my petition to Rome why your time of probation should be shortened. What reason shall I give?"

"You know best how to answer that. I place myself in your hands. Intercede for me."

"I will do all I can, but why, may I presume to inquire, are you in such a hurry? Is it that you are afraid that you will prove one of the weak vessels and turn back before the goal is reached?"

"No, I have told you that my mind is made up and my scruples silenced. My reason is a practical one—it is this: I have not told my wife yet and it will be hard to keep a secret from her for so long."

"You do not wish her to know, I gather. Is it that you are ashamed of the step you are taking? Remember it is a duty to your God that you are preparing to render."

"Bear with me, and do not let her know the truth yet, although I fear she suspects already."

"I cannot understand your wish, but I will

respect it. In a short time, for it will pass more quickly than you think, you will be called upon to acknowledge your faith to the world."

"I know it, and with your help I shall be ready to do so."

"You will be required to accept the infallibility of the Pope, the obligation of confession, the principle of transubstantiation, as well as other tenets of the Church," pursued the priest, glancing tentatively at his pupil.

"Do not try to frighten me," replied Paul, smiling; "I have been over the whole ground thoroughly, and I am prepared to——"

"Works without faith," pronounced the priest, firmly. "You were going to say 'accept,' but you must believe with your whole heart, mind and soul."

"You will end by irritating me and——"

"That I do not intend or wish to do," was the suave reply. "But I do wish to test your sincerity. Look, here is a little book—a manual of prayer. Read it over and try to digest its contents as far as you are able. In a day or so we shall enter on our course of instruction, but it is well to know the ground roughly first."

"I suppose you will take up the different subjects one at a time and place them under

various headings. What a complete system it is !”

“And yet you once thought it a ready-made one.”

“Yes,” was the startled reply, “but I now see the meaning of it all. It is a powerful organization, this Church of yours. In union there is strength, and I feel that there can be no weakness where iron rules hold the various parts in subjection.”

“You put it rather crudely. The Church rules, it is true, but with a gentle though firm hand. Take my place here at the desk for a minute—I wish you to make a few notes of what I am going to explain later in detail.”

Paul did as he was requested, and waited for the priest to speak.

“The seven sacraments of the Church are baptism, confirmation, penance, the holy eucharist, extreme unction, holy orders, and lastly, marriage. Have you got those written down ?”

“Yes,” answered Paul. “I shall get myself a more convenient book later on.”

“It would be advisable. Then I shall explain the commandments in detail, the seven deadly sins, and the ceremony of the mass with its various salient features.”

“What are the seven deadly sins ?”

“Pride, covetousness, luxury, sloth, glut-

tony, envy, and anger. Next time we shall take up the consideration of the first, sixth and seventh commandments, which treat specially of covetousness, luxury, and sloth. Later on we shall study the devotion of confession, the use and meaning of the rosary, ending up with a discussion and explanation of any matter which is not clear to you. I am going to give you also a catechism, and with the manual you already have your time will be quite fully occupied for the present."

"It will indeed, but I shall try to prove myself an apt pupil."

"But what of your painting?" asked the priest, "and the great picture? I would not have you neglect that. All work and no play is not advisable."

"That is work, too," replied Paul, somewhat surprised.

"True, I had forgotten, but work of a different kind, and variety even in matters of this sort is good—for religion is a rule of life and art its refinement."

"And both of them necessary."

"Indeed they are, but how much so, very few people stop to inquire. The modern tendency is to drift, to settle all matters according to a standard of one's own, to forget God and his manifold goodness. New

schools spring up, new teachers arise, and new systems of development are met with at every turn, but the old ways are best."

"Autres temps, autres mœurs!"

"To a certain extent, yes, but with limitations. It is never wise to allow that which is in an experimental stage to warp accepted ideals which have stood the test of centuries. Remember that the Almighty has spoken wisely when he said, 'Before Abraham was, I am.' But I am wandering, *figlio mio*—tell me of your work."

"My work?" began Paul slowly, while he knitted his brow under the stress of some powerful emotion. "Oh, I don't know. I have been making sketches which I shall work up for some of the minor details, but beyond that there does not seem to be much more to be done."

"Have you yet painted in the figure for which La Cantilena has already given you several sittings?"

"No," was the slow reply. "I want to think it over a little before I actually start on that part."

"My dear Paul," remarked the priest, "you will pardon me, but that is a very poor attempt at prevarication. I see that there is something else to account for the fact that

the sittings are, as I gather they must be, discontinued."

"I see no good reason why I should give you any further information on the subject. It would be better to ask the lady herself whether it was simply caprice that made her decide to bring the sittings to an end."

The priest smiled as if he were vaguely amused by Paul's attitude of dignified indifference.

"You must have offended her," he said. "You know these artistes are very *exigeantes*. Why, my dear fellow," he went on, dropping his bantering tone, "have you not guessed that the fair Elena has fallen in love with you?"

"Nonsense! you are romancing." But he changed color. "One must make allowances. She told me she was not equal to the exertion of continuing to pose. You are trying to make a great deal out of absolutely nothing."

Noticing that the feelings of his guest were somewhat disturbed, he thought it wise not to continue, so changed the subject.

"If you can give me about an hour a day or two hours every other day, we shall be able to get over a good deal of ground in a short time."

"I am at your disposal whenever will be most convenient," replied Paul, rising.

"Very well—every other day, then. And Paul, I wish to give you a little advice. It might be a good plan to show as much tenderness to your wife as possible. You may not know it, but I am quite serious—you have, given her good cause for jealousy. Oh, I am certain of it. Be very gentle with her, and—make love to her all over again. It should not be hard for you. Make her show you that she loves you, and you alone."

"Do you think there is any one else she cares for?" asked Paul, quickly.

"My dear fellow, find out for yourself."

"If any one else spoke to me as you are doing, I should be angry ; so I'll beg you to go no further. We may all of us have something to regret, but don't make me feel that I shall be sorry later on, for I value your friendship and support too highly to wish it interfered with."

"I am sorry, *figlio mio*. I am afraid I went too far just now, but it is the great interest I feel in you and yours which prompted me to speak out as I did. It was a liberty, and I regret it."

"Don't think any more of it. It is because it is true that I was so sensitive."

"What else is on your mind?" asked Father

Lamian, curiously, noticing a perplexed look gathering on Paul's face.

"I was thinking of my wife," replied Paul, in a low tone almost as if speaking to himself. "Do you think," looking up expectantly, "that she could ever be induced to follow my example?"

"To change her faith? My dear Paul," mused the priest, quietly, "it is hard to say. It would of course be easier for you and more conducive to your ultimate happiness if she should follow in your footsteps."

His face, as he stood at the window looking after the retreating figure of the young man, wore a mixed expression of joy and anxiety; the former, the result of his recent interview, the latter caused by the remembrance of the words he had heard but a short time since. Why did they keep ringing in his ears? "Beware of the day of retribution!" His brain throbbed with them, and he could not shake off the feeling of depression which they had caused.

His glance brightened as he still watched Paul Trefusis swinging easily down the road, and yet he turned back to his desk with something of a sigh.

His mind reverted to the baneful fascination of superstition, and he seated himself

uneasily at his desk, staring straight before him.

Presently he started, but did not dare to turn his head. Some one, he fancied, stood behind him. He trembled, but could not move, even if by so doing he might dispel the ghost, a wraith of the past, which no power seemed potent enough to rid him of. He could feel the accusing fire in the eyes which burnt into his soul, was conscious of the reproach in them, and gave himself up a prey to his fancied fears, which at the present moment appeared real enough.

The room seemed very still, although the clock on his desk ticked loudly, and yet the wretched man remained in the same position, his arms stretched out, his face rigid with fear.

He was like one in a trance, interwoven with a distorted pattern of truth. He passed one hand over his forehead and found it damp with perspiration. He was afraid, and must again seek solace in prayer. With an effort he turned and, looking behind him, breathed a sigh of relief to find himself alone. The sight of the familiar objects connected with the duties of his daily life helped to calm him,—the books arranged in careful rows, the orderly desk, the *prie-dieu* surmounted by a hand-

some crucifix, and, last of all, the sunshine pouring in at the window.

The *prie-dieu* seemed to beckon. He rose and slowly walked over to it—his haven of rest—and, sinking to his knees, again sought to gain peace from heaven from the torments of recollection. Memories of the past, however, held him in a vise, and he mechanically repeated one Paternoster and two Hail Marys to enable him to compose himself.

“Give me peace, my God, and absolve me from my sins. May not my righteous conduct since I joined the priesthood count in my favor? Must the memory of those other days still torture me? Shall the consequences of one sin hold me always, and may not repentance plead for me, so that Thy face be turned again towards me? Tell me what I must do to gain Thy favor and forgiveness. In Thy mercy, I pray Thee, make it possible for me to obtain salvation, but, above all, peace, and a light to guide me in the darkness of pain.”

The priest had been forcibly gripping the top of the *prie-dieu*, but he now relaxed and spread out his arms, with the palms of his hands open and upturned, while his head—the eyes always closed—was lifted as if awaiting some sign.

Either he was not in a receptive mood or

else favor from above was not to be vouchsafed him, for he passed one hand over his cheek and drew back, rising to his feet, letting his arms fall wearily to his side, while his head drooped. Prayer was unavailing, and a look of alarm spread over his face.

"I am frightened," he said like one in a dream, "but I must not show it."

It was the work of a comparatively short time to collect his effects and to sit down afterwards with a greater feeling of security than he had been able to bring about by any other means. His books, his *prie-dieu* and crucifix were packed; his clothes and more personal belongings would not take long to put together later, if it should be necessary, and he drew a long sigh of relief. He could not say what prompted him to act in this sudden way, but he smiled for the first time since the deep feeling of superstition had caught him up in a net of terror, and the grimace had a suspicion of defiance in it.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," he murmured, as he restlessly strode from the room.

XIX

LATER in the evening Miss Webster sat at her window in deep thought. The moonbeams danced on the waters of the lake, the reflections of the overhanging trees shimmered in waving lines, but still she remained with brow knitted and her face wearing a sad, worried look. She was, in fact, harassed and her investigations seemed to be at a standstill. Bright as had been her anticipation before she tried to disentangle the mystery, she now felt herself coming under the shadow of gloom and depression which enveloped the household like a pall. It seemed impossible that the light of day could ever pierce it again, without the intervention of some influence which she knew she did not possess. The worst of the situation was that the priest was so sure of himself, and used any means to gain his ends—ends in themselves not wrong, but possessing the highest elements of good—that it was clearly useless to try and combat him on any common ground. It was, she bitterly concluded, futile to feel hopeful at present, for she found herself close to a hard and impenetrable stone wall, strong enough

to withstand ordinary attacks, and the only thing to do was to wait until some extraordinary weapon could be found to make a breach, so that the invincible enemy could be attacked and put to final and everlasting flight. Then only would the clouds of doubt and mystery be dispelled and the light of truth shine forth again.

It was impossible to argue with a man who believed in himself so thoroughly; that he was clearly in the right, Miss Webster herself admitted. To go further and agree with him, but to object to his methods, to mock at the steps by which he was reaching the summit, to tell him he was doing harm by his action to the innocent, would not affect the conscience of one who considered that any means, however crooked, were permissible if they served to point to the goal he was striving after.

It was reasonable to suppose that his conscience did not prick him, if his actions coincided with the very kernel of his faith. Having arrived at this crucial point, Miss Webster did not see how she could find a flaw in his conduct, or alter its course, save by reconstructing the basis of his belief, which would amount to remodeling his Church and was therefore impossible.

At this moment Anna Trefusis opened the door and walked softly into the room.

"I hope I am not disturbing you, dear Miss Martha," she said wistfully, "but you told me to come up later, and I am so anxious to hear about your talk with Father Lamian."

"Take this low chair at my feet, and make yourself comfortable," was the gentle reply. "Isn't it a beautiful evening? And what a charming tea-gown that is—real lace. How extravagant! But a pretty woman must have her caprices, and you are lovely, dear."

"How you soothe me, you kind friend!"

"I love the gleam in your hair, too," said the older woman, loosening Anna's hair and letting the thick coils slip slowly through her fingers; "in the silver light it moves and seems to be like some living thing."

"Oh, but that sounds like snakes or some other dreadful crawling creature! I am sorry to feel that my poor red hair is so repulsive as that."

"If I were a man, I should have to compliment you, but I am not going to do any such thing. Instead I am going to braid it for you, as you look like some wild fury at present."

Anna submitted to the kindly ministrations of her friend, who put her hair into two long

plaits which she wound gracefully about the shapely head.

"Now you look like one of those Botticelli saints."

"I must be like patience on a monument then, if I look as I feel, for I am dying for you to tell me what you did to-day. You haven't told me anything yet ; why don't you go on?"

"My dear girl, you must not try to hurry me, for I have reasons for wishing to take my own time."

"And I know very well what they are," replied Anna, sitting up very straight ; "you have no good news and you are afraid to tell me what you think. Isn't that true?"

"Yes and no," was the glum reply, given unwillingly, "but I am not afraid, unless it be to cause you more distress."

"It means," exclaimed Mrs. Trefusis, tensely, "that even you cannot help me. Oh, I have lost all hope !" she cried, rising and throwing out her arms with a gesture of despair.

"This is no time for dramatics, my dear Anna. You had better take a common-sense view of the affair and accept the situation," but it was useless to try and stem the passionate outburst, for Mrs. Trefusis continued speaking without heeding the other's words.

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would look on her as a fool, but I am so fond of her that I cannot bring myself to let her drift absolutely."

Miss Webster rose and advanced a few steps towards the door, but paused suddenly as she heard quick footsteps approaching.

The door was thrown open and without a moment's hesitation Anna rushed in with a piece of paper in her hand.

"Too late!" she cried, tragically. "He is dead!"

"Who is?" asked Martha.

"Hillary. He died this morning. Poor fellow—he loved me."

"Fudge, child. Don't talk like that—rather thank God that the poor fellow is released from his sufferings," answered she dryly.

"Perhaps you are right, still I cannot but reproach myself that I did not go to him long ago."

"You can do nothing for the dead, even if he did love you. Occupy yourself with the living who needs you, and who, if he but knew it, is crying out from the depth of his soul for you to help him. In heaven there is no giving in marriage. Anna, be a woman and not a great goose. Turn to your God and pray for aid," she cried, and burst into tears, to the great surprise of the younger woman, who

stopped dead, as it were, then rushing to her side, placed her gently in a chair and fell at her feet.

"I am so sorry, but what would you have me do?" cried Anna in dismay. "My husband no longer loves me. He is worshipping strange graven images, and Jezebels—oh, La Cantilena is not the first—and yet you counsel me to——"

"I tell you," was the grave answer, "to turn the other cheek and prove yourself a Christian."

"Why?" Anna rejoined, coldly, "when I believe he has sinned, and he would spurn me, if——"

"Anna, aren't you ashamed to say such things!"

"But if they are true——"

"Ah, but are they? You believe your husband has been unfaithful to you, broken his vows, but you have no proof, therefore I say that——"

"I should pardon him, because he is a man, whereas, we poor weak women, if we make one misstep, are cast out into utter darkness."

"I never said any such thing," replied Miss Webster, very stiffly, "and I object to having words put in my mouth which never even

passed my lips, or accredited with ideas which never formed in my mind."

"As you please," responded Mrs. Trefusis, rising and turning away with a toss of her head.

Miss Webster was silent, because it hurt her to hear her friend utter such words, and also, as they were totally untrue, she could not help feeling that they were but the outcome of incipient hysteria.

"Come back, dear," she said at last in a low voice; "we have been friends for too long to quarrel now. Let us help each other, for we can do that, whilst waiting what is, I have no doubt, already ordained."

Mrs. Trefusis turned unwillingly towards her, but did not move nearer, so Martha rose, and walking over, took her into her arms and held her close. The lithe figure did not relax and there was no response.

"Do you know, dear child, that I wish to help you," the voice continued, softly, "but you make it so difficult? Why don't you yield? After all I have tried to do, you should show me some affection, some consideration, at least."

Anna began to tremble and sway a little, until presently, under the softening influence of the stronger personality, she threw her arms

around the sturdy frame and burst into wild weeping. She permitted herself to be led to a couch without resistance, and there Martha bathed her forehead with cologne, fanning her afterwards until the angry flush had subsided and the over-excited nerves became more normal.

"Anna," she said, "when you feel like it, I have something to say, but you must not excite yourself unnecessarily; you have already had enough to try any woman, and although at most times you are hard to ruffle, yet I must confess you have almost reached your limit of endurance."

"I know," said Mrs. Trefusis, still a little agitated, "I have said a great many things which may not be true, but have I not had good cause to think the worst of——"

"Ah, that is just what I wish to talk about, and I want you to lie still and listen to me. Will you promise not to interrupt if you can control yourself? You are tired after the luxury of yielding to such an outburst, and I should think you would be willing to hear what I believe is the truth; I have no proof that it is so,—it is merely my instinct which prompts me."

"I can no more."

"Agreed, but you have only begun to love,

and as for living, you don't understand the first principles of it. I know the rest of the quotation,—something about earthly joys, who knows? Perhaps they may come in time."

"I saw a peasant woman to-day," said Mrs. Trefusis, "with her baby in her arms. She was ugly, and as for the child, it was hideous, but there was a bond between the two, an intangible rainbow of sympathy and understanding which robbed the picture of its squalid aspect and bathed it in a glory shed as if by unseen angels."

"It is a pity you have no children, my dear. You would be happier, and find much better occupation than writing interminable letters, or that morbid habit of thinking which has grown on you of late. I hope, however, the days of miracles are not over, and that some day I——"

"Never mind that, please. I cannot bear to think of such a possibility, which is not and never will be a probability. Come, what do you want to say to me?"

"I would like to feel that you did not think so badly of La Cantilena," began Martha, slowly. "I am quite positive that she is not at heart a bad woman,—at least if she is, it was not Paul who made her so. If you stop to consider the question, you will see that she is

acting under instructions—commands, rather, —which she fears to disobey.”

“From the priest, of course, but why?”

“Father Lamian hopes that you will follow in your husband’s footsteps. She is merely, in a roundabout way, trying to draw you two together in the hope that you may——”

“But I never would, and you know it, don’t you?”

“Yes, that is what I told the priest. He knows you have a good deal of money, and hopes to induce you to give it to the Church.”

Anna sniffed somewhat fiercely at these words, but did not make any rejoinder.

“You see what it all means now, and how impossible it is to do anything?”

“But can’t you suggest some way to prevent——”

“No,” was the brusque reply, “but I do counsel patience, for I cannot think it possible that the God we believe in and who loves us will permit this wily adversary to succeed.”

Anna sighed, resignedly.

“Miss Martha, do you believe it right to be superstitious?” she asked, timidly.

“I don’t know. Some things which people think are going to bring bad luck make one feel creepy, but it does not seem right to be

too much influenced—not if one is a professing Christian. It doesn't seem consistent, you see, and savors too much of popery and——”

“Yes, I suppose that is true ; but if a thing is not exactly right, it does not follow that it is absolutely wrong, does it? You see I must take comfort in whatever way I can.”

“What do you mean, dear?”

“Don't think me fanciful, or laugh at me, please, and I will tell you.” Then Anna related the semi-vision, or quasi-waking dream, she had had in regard to her husband and Mr. Neville some time ago, when she was holding one of her lonely vigils on the moon-bathed terrace. “It was before the priest came into our lives and while poor Hillary was alive. Then came his letter and the question as to what I had better do ; but I can never forget the expression in Paul's eyes as he looked down at me at the end ; although I have wavered often since then, and appeared to lose all faith, still, the remembrance of that night and its conclusion have often been a comfort to me. Now tell me, is that really and truly wrong?”

“No, certainly not, and it may be that Providence is showing you in some mysterious way the end you are hoping for. Take comfort as best you can, but if you are to

suffer, you must accept the inevitable with resignation. Remember, no cross, no crown!"

"What a good friend you are! You have been more than kind to me, and I am only an ungrateful, foolish woman, whom you must despise. Do you laugh at me behind my back? Oh, I am sure you do!"

"Well, then, you are wrong. I do think you foolish; you see I am quite frank, but then you must also know that I love you—almost as if you were my own bairn. Now to bed, or else you will lose your beauty sleep."

"I hope I may sleep to-night; I am sure I need it. You have almost restored my faith in a divine and merciful Being, whom I was in danger of forgetting. His ways are best. Good-night, and thank you a thousand times."

Martha felt the grateful kiss lightly placed on her cheek, gave one in return, and heard the door close softly as Mrs. Trefusis took her departure; but she leaned back in her chair, looking dreamily into the night, her mind occupied with various visions which, from time to time, pierced the mist of depression that held her enthralled.

Surely she must have been dozing, for she woke with a start, fresh from an encounter with Father Lamian, who had with lightning rapidity eluded her, assuming many horrid

shapes, ending as a serpent which writhed in her clenched fist. Next, when she lost herself in a maze of dreams, she was holding Paul back from some invisible danger. She grasped him firmly, but little by little she felt her strength waning until, at the moment of letting him slip away altogether, some external noise brought her again to earth.

What did it all mean? 'Of course she was over-tired and had better go to bed; but it was hard to leave the comfortable chair in which her head was luxuriously supported by a soft cushion, and the moonlight which flooded the room was so full of charm that she could not make up her mind to move, at least not yet. Then, too, if she could not rest, and if strange dreams disturbed her slumbers, why she was just as well here as in bed.

So she remained where she was and gazed at the silver light, her mind more at peace, until with a jump she sat up and looked with astonishment at a small object which rested on her left arm; surely it must be—why, it was a baby, and the little puckered face resembled Anna Trefusis.

"See here, Martha," she exclaimed, sitting up suddenly very straight, "it's time you roused yourself—mistaking pillows for babies, and at your age, too."

XX

A SINGLE thrilling note insinuated itself into the very core of Anna's being, causing her vague uneasiness, as if it presaged some intangible trouble, but musician that she was, she could not distinguish its pitch, or even succeed in counting the harmonics contained in it, although its insistent reverberations should have made it possible for her to at least recognize them. The only result was to make her uncomfortable and extremely nervous. What was happening, and where was she? She called out to Paul, but her voice sounded strange and weak and there was no response. It must surely be a nightmare, for she clearly remembered going to bed and tossing a good deal, before she dropped off into a restless and troubled slumber. Putting out her hand to feel about, for it was very dark, she hastily drew it back—she was lying on a bed of cool, damp moss, and near her the steady drip of water intermingled with that same strange, unearthly note of horrid music. Once she heard the whirring of fast-flying wings, huge and ghostly, and the moaning afar off of beings who were undergoing torture—worse, doubt-

less, than the pangs of death. Plaintive and often heartrending as the cries were, it was nothing to the souging of the rising breeze and the dull rumble of approaching thunder. She was not a timid woman ordinarily, but at the present moment she felt a growing horror and the sensation of terror which an animal caught in a trap must have. Suddenly a blinding flash of lurid light revealed the outline of a dank cavern, with a faintly discernible opening, leading forth into a sombre forest, possibly alive with shapes, bristling with terrible creatures. She could imagine the unlovely sights she must witness if her courage permitted her to venture out.

The day began to break and the shape of the opening grew clearer momentarily, but the light was too gray to make it possible for her to see definitely what kind of place lay without. She could distinguish dim forms of what seemed to be waving trees, boulders of great size, and always the sound of water, splashing and dripping, while like a portentous undertone of destiny the ghostly note rang out, like the sound of a bell, but giving a muffled clang, as if it came from a great distance. Often it resembled a church bell and sometimes the silvery tone of a smaller tinkling one. Again it seemed to possess a more

sinister undercurrent of some power like inevitable fate, as if an evil creature were tolling and infusing into it some of its innate wickedness. The light of day grew more intense, but she noticed with a feeling of despair that it lacked any rosy tinge, that the inside of the cave was bathed in dull green, while without a grayish-yellow mist lay low, through which more distant objects could be made out with difficulty. It was, too, as if no form of life existed, for she could see no signs of any, hear no twittering of birds—all was still and deserted, save where the colorless veil of silence was torn by the moans of tortured ones, sounding faintly afar off, mingling with the cloying sweetness of that evil note, which continued without break or change.

For the first time Anna looked down at her dress ; it was of gray, with loose sleeves,—a shapeless garment bound at the waist by a rough cord. On her head she wore a white veil, while her feet were covered imperfectly by sandals. Strange as it may seem, she noticed that nothing she had on was even damp, although the place where she was reeked with it and an evil odor began to arise, apparently emanating from the ground or the walls, she could not tell which. Outside the mist was dissipating and the whole scene be-

coming bathed in lurid light, which caused all green objects to look gray and all gray ones to take on a ghastly hue. She shuddered and glanced timidly about her, only to draw back in horror as she perceived smoke issuing from one corner of the rocky shelter and several crawling creatures with cold, loathsome bodies, stealing noiselessly over the rough walls and ground. Clearly it was time to beat a retreat, so she rose and fled into the open. There it was hardly better, for the rough path, choked with sharp stones, hurt her feet and more than once the twisted roots of gloomy overhanging trees caused her to stumble. In despair she paused, but a new terror was added to her troubles, for—it may have been the effect of an overwrought imagination—she fancied that from time to time diminutive creatures of grotesque appearance moved rapidly before and behind her, dropping from the crooked branches with unexpected suddenness, and almost before she was aware of them, rolling away behind the moss-covered rocks with diabolical shrieks or leering grins full of malice and evil. She feared to advance or retreat ; she stepped aside from the uneven pathway only to find herself stung by nettles, which caused her cruel anguish and pain, while a thousand shiny snakes with red bead-like

eyes darted hither and thither. Some unaccountable force now urged her onward, whither she knew not, while the tyranny of the unseen music added its mysterious influence to draw her towards some distant goal. So, perforce, she plodded on wearily without thought as to where she was going, paying no attention to the ugly gnomes or other disturbing influences, being forced to pick her way carefully, in order to avoid the pitfalls which soon grew more frequent.

How her poor bruised feet ached and bled, but she had not the moral courage to go back. How tired she was, and yet she must go on, comforting herself as best she could by repeating mechanically, over and over again, the words: "Abide with me, O Lord!"

Surely it was becoming less sombre, the trees more sparse, while the pale greenish light, if not actually fading, seemed somewhat less vivid. She glanced anxiously ahead of her, and could hardly repress a cry of joy as she saw the clearness of the open, still some way off, but there. It spurred her to fresh energy. She was glad to welcome any change, for nothing could be worse than the past, or indeed the present, ameliorated as it was by the magic ray of hope.

With what renewed vigor did she hasten

on, little knowing to what scenes of trial she must be an unwilling witness ; possessed with a vague, half-formed idea that she might be too late, but for what she hardly knew or cared !

The blare of distant trumpets assailed her ears, the timidly triumphant sound of victory to come. As if expectant of the result a fanfare was being rehearsed. The low-toned voices of a chorus in unison came fitfully along the defile, crowned by rocky heights, at the head of which she presently found herself borne, as it seemed, on the pinions of an uncertain breeze ; it was a song of triumph to come, of which the singers dared hardly be certain, for their voices were muffled, as if they could not bring themselves to amplify the melody into splendid chords of bursting happiness or allow their throats yet to swell with its full glory.

Above the dreary valley a brighter path passed, hewn out of the solid rock, though below all was in shadow and sadness, "the valley of the shadow of death," thought Anna, as she paused for an instant to look down over the dizzy edge before pursuing her way towards what she felt must be the beginning of the end.

The end ! Was she then enduring the

signs of death. She supposed that this strange word must be due to a feverish condition, for it could not be for such a state is accompanied by little sensation, and she had certainly been suffering. How different from her father! To lie all alone in this wilderness and before she knew the truth! Where was Paul, and why did not some one try to snatch her back, to let her see again the outside world and the faces of those she loved?

She walked on slowly as these reflections passed swiftly through her mind, but now that the horrors of that gloomy wood were ended, and those dreadful spirits of evil remained within its confines, she sank on a projecting rock to rest. It was like an oasis in the desert, pleasant to tarry in for a short time, where she could forget the experience of the past. After this breathing spell, she would feel refreshed and be able to push on, better prepared to endure whatever might be in store for her. With eyes closed, she pressed her cheek against the cold stone, but her mind raced on confusedly.

She found it impossible to compose herself, being too exhausted, and, besides, the sound of music seemed less vague, as if she were approaching it; that fact served to rouse her

more than anything else. Suddenly, with nerves tingling and on edge, she fancied she heard a faint suspicion of voices from below ; straining to catch the slightest sound—for there must soon be footsteps—she waited in patience. Soon it became apparent that some one was approaching. Peeping cautiously down, she perceived two men slowly making their way up ; one was a priest, bearing a striking resemblance to Father Lamian, supporting a companion, whom she recognized, with a start, as her husband. The older man, fresh and vigorous, had placed his arm about the other's shoulders, and by gentle effort was aiding his faltering attempt to ascend, preventing the tired frame from falling. She hastily retreated behind a convenient boulder and, crouching there, listened with wildly-beating heart to the conversation which ensued between the two.

Father Lamian led Paul to the very rocky seat which she had vacated and allowed him to rest there.

"Courage, my pupil, the goal is almost gained."

Never had she heard the priest speak in such an oily tone, and the self-confidence indicated by the mellow timbre aroused her antagonism ; but her husband did not seem

affected either by it or the wildness of the terrible scene.

"You told me of rocks, of stumbling-blocks in this Valley of Shadows, but I can see merely beauty in it and the tender flowers springing up along our way."

"You do not feel tired, you wish to go on at once?"

"No, let us rest here for awhile, so that I may feast my eyes on these glorious works of nature, and let my soul in fancy float off into those purple distances, where doubtless the abodes of the blessed are."

"You see nothing ugly in all this?" asked the priest, anxiously.

"No, nothing," was the calm reply.

"And can you hear the moans of those who are undergoing the ordeal?"

"No sounds come to me, save the music of happiness which is singing in my heart. One single note rings true and clear, calling me, drawing me onward."

Anna could hardly repress a gasp of astonishment as she heard her husband utter these strange words in that dull voice, but she could not move,—some mysterious power forced her to listen in silence. She could not understand how he found any beauty in the scene, for the greenish sunlight was being slowly withdrawn

in a mysterious way, and replaced by a dull gray tint, while there was a gradual return of that ghastly light which previously had caused her such terror by its unearthly effect ; and then the music, which had so disturbed her and even now produced a sense of foreboding, was acceptable to him ; all this gave her qualms as she pictured his strange situation.

There seemed to be many things which she could not comprehend ; for instance, why did Paul use such stilted words ? Of course, being an artist, he must love the beautiful, but not to such an exaggerated extent. Then again he appeared to be satisfied. What had wrought this change in him ? Was it the power manifested, not by an all-merciful God, but by the force of a strong organization ? He did not ask the reason he was brought to this place or whither he was going ; worst of all, would he ever return to more familiar scenes ? It was impossible for Anna to find satisfying answers to these maddening queries, so she listened to what her husband was saying and to the priest's remarks.

"I am in your hands, Father. Do with me as you will."

It was her husband's voice, though changed as if the virile quality had been withdrawn,

not making it weak, but merely dull. Listen ! What was he saying ?

"I have accepted all. Nothing now can shake my faith. The precepts you have sown have taken root and will soon put forth tiny buds, which under your further guidance will blossom forth into fragrant blooms, the white flowers of truth, pure desire, and divine love."

Not an idea connected with the earth, which seemed so far away, did he express ; not a thought of love for her did he utter, indeed not a word about her. Could it be that already he had been taught to forget her ?

"Do you not find contemplation of higher things conducive to calm such as you never thought possible ?" asked the priest. "The way you must take is clearly shown and leads but to peace. If you stray from it, bound as you are by the fetters of human frailty, I am at hand to lead you back into it and absolve you from your sin."

"But how can one lead two lives,—that of the work-a-day world, and the other, the divine ?"

"To Him and His saints all things are possible. Pray and be steadfast in your faith. Soon you will bathe in the healing water of divine forgiveness and your eyes will see the glories of heaven open before you as a

promise which some day will surely be fulfilled, for the power to understand and be comforted will be granted."

"I do not grasp your meaning, I——"

"Wait until the baptism in the pool has revealed these mysteries to you. The most perfect trust is necessary. All you have endured, all you have seen and done is but preparation for the last step,—your entrance into the Church, your gracious reception into her protecting arms. Come now, my soldier, onward, ever onward. Straighten thy shoulders, buckle on thy armor, and gird thee about with the ghostly breast-plate of divine strength."

The trembling woman heard the two leave ; listening to their voices growing fainter before she dared venture to follow them, their every movement influenced hers. Could it be she had a mission, was she destined to be her husband's deliverer ?

She rose, and forgetting the roughness of the paths, followed fast in pursuit. Undismayed, she continued her way, until she espied two figures on the line of the horizon, as it were, apparently moving away from her. This sight caused a new energy to spring up, and her feet, as if fitted with wings, flew over the uneven ground. The feeling of fear de-

parted and gave place to anxiety lest she should be too late, but for what, she neither knew nor cared; the impression that it behooved her to hasten on, remained, while she strove to possess her soul in patience as she ran rapidly onward.

She seemed to be totally unconscious of the passing of events or her surroundings. She did not appear to notice that the path was becoming more and more encumbered by obstacles; that other people were hastening on like herself; that small globules of flame danced about her, or that instead of lessening her speed she was increasing it,—the desire to be in time for the unrevealed ceremony was uppermost in her mind. Whither she was bound she knew not. Trees, rocks, and other objects she hardly saw, even if she had been able to stop, until with a gasping breath she realized that she could not. Still, she felt herself to be under the protection of some guiding hand, and did not worry on this score. Without knowing what she was to do, yet certain that all would be explained at the proper time, she sped on.

After what seemed an interminable interval, she came to a stop on the summit of a small green hill, not suddenly enough to cause a jar, however, for she suffered no inconvenience or

discomfort from the cessation of her rapid flight ; it seemed as if at one moment she was going at full speed, and in the next second found herself sitting on a grassy mound.

What would happen next ? Her complete indifference made her believe she was either becoming a fatalist, careless as to the trend or result of her quest, or else was she herself as unreal as her surroundings appeared ?

Dazed, she rose and followed a motley crowd of people who were pushing forward, jostling and eager, towards what seemed a small strip of woods, with strained expressions on their gaunt and haggard faces. Soon she too found herself in the midst of this throng, her sombre dress conspicuous in the midst of robes of white, scarlet, or purple ; the women wore veils, but the men had a species of shapeless turban on their heads.

How loud the music rang in her ears, and somehow, it irritated her, for it possessed a triumphant tone, which made her uneasy.

The band of worshippers, but lately at her side, suddenly disappeared, and she found herself alone, looking down on a seething pool. Men and women were struggling in the vortex of waters and being drawn into its whirling depths, like so many atoms. Wide steps led to the fatal whirlpool, and Anna saw her late

companions hurrying down this steep descent, and hurling themselves into the black waste, which, yawning and turning, drew them into it. Where was Paul and his loathsome mentor? She scanned each face eagerly, but they were all strange, and wore a rapt, uplifted look which puzzled her.

The stream of people continued, and she looked anxiously at them. At last, no longer under the guidance of the priest, but walking alone, her husband approached. He, too, looked exalted, and moved joyfully down to the foaming waters. At the brink he paused, and she saw that his lips were moving, as if he were praying. His dress of brown was girded at the waist by a rough cord, from which a rosary hung, and over his shoulder he carried a staff, surmounted by a crucifix.

As Anna looked, vivid lightning played about, and instinctively she ran to her husband's side, for already one foot was plunged into the whirling flood. With the din of the restless music in her ears, she stretched out her hand to seize him, but before she could do so, a burst of mocking laughter sounded in her ears, and looking up she saw the malicious eyes of the priest gazing down at her.

Her senses reeled, and the whirl of rushing wings sounded loudly, until with a start she

knew she was being carried along by them, while the mad bursts of music changed to the solemn tones of a church organ, and she found herself looking, as from a height, on the nave and high altar of a church.

A crowd of people filled the edifice, and standing alone was Paul, now clothed in white, with his hands crossed on his breast, a shaft of light shining on him from some unknown source.

"Paul," she cried, "it is I, Anna!" but her voice did not reach him, for she found that she was seated on the back of some huge bird, which mysteriously remained poised in mid-air; it was the wings of this great creature, now motionless, that she had previously heard.

Uttering a short and fervent prayer, without hesitation she hurled herself down in the hopes of coming to her husband's aid. Through the ether she fell with lightning speed, but when on the point of touching the mosaic floor on which her husband stood, a black mist descended, shutting out the scene. She had swooned.

XXI

"PUPPO," said his mother, using the diminutive of his name, "come here, I want to talk over something with you."

Marietta was tired, but could not go to bed without looking over the papers her poor cousin had intrusted to her. Beppo always knew what to do and was safe as the grave, invariably keeping his own counsel, so she did not consider it disloyal to ask his advice; besides, he was clear-headed, and would be able instinctively to suggest what should be done with the contents of this yellow envelope tied with faded green string, which she held in her hand.

"Come, lad, do not keep me waiting. I am tired and wish to go to bed, but must first look over these papers."

"What is it you wish, *madre mia?*" asked Beppo, walking leisurely into the room.

The kitchen was untenanted at this hour, for her husband always left early after supper to row anyone who might wish to go out in the moonlight, and the younger children being packed off to bed, Mrs. Lorani and her son

could examine undisturbed the motley collection which she now spread out on the table.

"These are all to be gone over. Sit here and tell me what you think."

She opened a letter, choosing one at random, and began to spell it over to herself.

"Why, it is from my poor cousin and addressed to me," she exclaimed aloud, in surprise. "'Feared I might die . . . so write these lines to say what I wish you to do for me. I promised Rosalie, if I died before I carried out her last request . . . I have never found out who Giulio was, although he gave the name of Massi, our family name . . . It was wrong of her never to have confessed to her priest . . . Unconsciously she wronged me in extorting a promise to do the same . . . that is why I leave it to your good judgment . . . to know what to do . . . God will not let the guilty go free . . . if he is alive seek him out . . . let the vengeance of the dead visit him . . . if he is doing harm use this as a means to prevent him . . . I never heard what became of her daughter . . . she may be dead . . . if she is alive and in his clutches, help her to rid herself of him . . . She is not to blame . . . not certain whether she was really married . . . I count on you to do all you can for my sake and Rosina's, who

I loved as a sister.' Here, look it over," she said aloud, handing the letter to her son, "I cannot understand it. Who are these people she speaks of and how can I ever find them?"

"Um, um . . . um," murmured Beppo, poring over the letter; "Giulio, who is he? It is an uncommon name here. I know Mario, the butcher's boy, Guglielmo, Pietro, but no Giulio—stay; there is a boy at Tremezzo, the son of the wine merchant; could it be one of his people? Eh! but we must search out this slippery fellow. I shall ask some one if she knows any of these dogs of Giulios. Who was Rosina? I never heard of her."

"She was a distant cousin of ours who died many years ago. What a sad history she had! Married early to a young, handsome devil of a fellow and deserted only a few years later. This man passed himself off as a clerk and was absent a great deal on business, he said; but about that I think differently. However, he was fairly good to her while his love lasted, and then, one fine day, he did not come back. Regularly he sent a sum of money to her, always punctual to the day until she died. All this Loretta told me long ago."

"But it speaks here of a child—a daughter," said Beppo, referring to the letter. "What

became of her? Do you know where she is now or what her name was?"

"No, I do not. She disappeared and no one has ever heard of her since. She has come to no good, I'll be bound."

"Let me see the other papers. This looks like a certificate of marriage," he remarked, opening one of the papers. "Is it in order? You should know that better than I."

"Yes, it is all as it should be, I think," answered Marietta, glancing at it carelessly, and here are several letters. Let us read them. I wonder if they are important?"

"Not much, I fancy," replied Beppo, peering at the sheets over his mother's shoulder. "They look like business communications. Money sent, or something of that sort, perhaps. Yes, I am right, for here is a memorandum of the date the sum was received, the amount of it, and the acknowledgment endorsed. Very business-like of cousin Rosina."

"What am I to do with all of this?" she asked, pointing to the litter of papers helplessly. "I do not know what ought to——"

"Listen, *madre mia*. I know some one who is discreet and wise—it's Miss Webster. Let me ask her advice; it may be she can help us, as really I don't know what to do."

"I do not like the idea of anyone else see-

ing them, but, if you think best, take them to her."

"Very well. I am sure to find her if I go now. It's only half-past eight. Don't wait for me ; I shall see you in the morning."

He snatched up his hat and ran off to the villa. As luck would have it, he found Miss Webster alone on the terrace.

"Signorina, will you pardon me? My mother and I don't know what to do with these." And he handed over the papers. "May we be so bold as to ask your advice? It is a great liberty."

"Where did they come from?" asked Martha, looking up from her perusal of the contents of the packet.

Beppo related the circumstances under which they had fallen into his mother's hands and waited for her to speak ; she appeared deeply interested in the letters and seemed to be giving much attention to the marriage certificate, which fact Beppo's quick eye noted. Presently, she glanced at him, saying,—

"I wish you to give me these papers. Oh, I know it is a great deal to ask, but I want to try an experiment with them. Will you trust them to me and not ask any questions?"

"I hardly know, I——"

"No, don't consult anyone. There is no

time to waste. I must act quickly. Your cousin Rosina evidently wished to wreak vengeance on the person who made her unhappy. I may be wrong, but my woman's instinct—no, not that, but wouldn't it be a fine thing if I—Beppo, let me have these precious sheets."

The boy hesitated and turned aside, walking a few paces along the terrace, trying to collect his thoughts and come to a decision, but his mind was in too great a whirl and he remained silent. He looked again at Miss Webster, whose eager, inquiring eyes sought his, but he could not speak.

"Suppose," she continued earnestly, "we should be the means of bringing two people together again? If you were certain of this, would you hesitate as you are doing?"

"Oh! You are wiser than I," he said, capitulating. "The papers are yours. Perhaps some saint is working through you to bring the malefactor to book."

"You think I am referring to Father Lamian? No; I speak of La Cantilena. Take these papers and deliver them into her hands and await the result in prayer. I don't know why I think so, but she will know what to do; if she don't, I shall return them to you to-morrow. Be here at nine o'clock and take me for a row; I love the morning air. Be off, now."

Miss Webster regretted her mad impulse as soon as the boy disappeared, but it was then too late to call him back. Her conscience pricked her as she suddenly concluded that, the papers not being hers, she had no right to influence Beppo in regard to them. She had acted on the spur of the moment, but, hoping that all might still be well, she tried to convince herself that the feminine instinct was not often at fault. What would Elena say when she saw the papers and what would she do? Could it even be remotely possible that they would convey anything to her, or would they be only meaningless after all? What a mistake not to have asked Elena to return them if she did not find them what Martha hoped! What did she hope? She hardly knew. How foolish, how inane to be carried away by a passing whim! Well, it was too late for such useless recriminations. She sighed as she entered her room and lit the candles, for the situation was becoming very complex.

Meanwhile, time was passing, and the three gray sisters were tossing their fragile shuttle from one to the other with discordant croaks, uttering predictions of dire import, their harsh laughter mingling with the hootings of the owls and other weird noises of the night.

Father Lamian, who was busily writing in his study, felt unaccountably nervous, and from time to time pushed his writing away from him, until with an impatient exclamation he put out the lamp and anxiously paced the little room.

His reflections were destined to be rudely disturbed, for the door opened suddenly and he was surprised to see a woman standing before him. She was wrapped in a dark cloak, her face hidden by a black lace veil, which she had thrown over her head presumably in haste. She showed in more than one way the evidence of having acted without premeditation. Without any difficulty he recognized Elena, even before she removed her veil and allowed her wrap to fall back.

Startled as he was, he could not repress an exclamation of admiration at the wonderful beauty of the woman. Dressed in soft black pailletted silk, with diamonds gleaming at her throat and wrists, she was resplendent.

"Father," she said, calmly, "I have come to say good-bye."

"Is it possible that you are going away?" he queried, in a measure relieved by her words. "Can I believe that my little bird is tired of her gilded cage and longs for the open air and—liberty?"

Elena was not disturbed by the suave tones of the priest and the evil smiles which accompanied them, but she looked at him strangely. Could she have been mistaken, and was he not the man she thought after all? Had she been acting under the influence of blind instinct, born of a sudden idea conceived after reading those fatal papers? Yet, who was her father, and what hold had the priest over her? Surely it had been madness to connect these two. Could there be any identity between them? Alas, none. She could not, however, help feeling that his secret which she had taunted him with was a fact and in some way connected with her. Granted, for the sake of argument, that it were so, why would it ruin her reputation? Why did he alone know it? She pondered this deeply. She thought of her father, the Giulio whose sin had made her what she was, then of Father Lamian. Why, he was Giulio, too! Then Giulio and Father Lamian, mad as it seemed, were one and the same. Had she acted too hastily? Courage. Face the present, for he is speaking,

"Not so fast, my little one, not so fast. You forget——"

"I forget nothing. I came to say what I have said, and I am going. We part to-

night, to meet no more. I fear you no longer. Your power over me is at an end."

"So you are going to leave me," he answered, still vaguely amused, "and you imagine that my influence over you is waning?"

"At an end," she corrected, speaking firmly.

"Ah! I must ask you to be more explicit. I do not understand. What do you mean?"

"That I—I know all—all, do you hear?" she replied, desperately, taking her courage in both hands.

"And what is that all?" he inquired, with studied calmness.

"That I am your natural daughter, Giulio Massi," hissed Elena.

"Be careful what you say," interposed the priest, moistening his dry lips. "It is not true."

"I have the proofs here." She produced the packet of papers and waved them before his eyes.

Father Lamian made the mistake of trying to snatch them from her, but she stepped quickly aside and eluded him.

"No, my father," she sneered, a rising conviction of the truth making her feel more sure of herself, "I shall not let you have them—they are too precious. Only a few people

know my secret, and they will spare me, I feel sure. I am the only one who is aware of yours as yet."

A tense pause followed, and then,—

"My past must not be known, it would spell ruin," he whispered.

"Ah! you are frightened. I have not decided whether to publish the story or not. It would hurt you more than me, if I did."

"You dare to threaten me!" he cried, advancing angrily, but all at once he was looking into the shining barrel of a pistol, and recoiled in terror.

"Listen," he panted. "It was a sin of long ago. I have tried to live it down. The career of my priesthood has been stainless. Spare me, I implore you. See, I humble myself at your feet."

Elena laughed harshly in response.

"Now you know how it feels to be like a hunted animal. The tables are turned, and it was time. My artistic life will not die by slander. The fault was not mine, and, heaven be praised, my voice you cannot destroy! It is a gift from above, to show that I am under the protection of higher powers than you command. If I think wise I shall certainly speak out, but I have not yet made up my mind."

"You are a fiend incarnate! Don't you

see how I am suffering? Let me know the worst. What do you intend to do?"

"I hardly know," replied Elena, slowly, feeling the keenest pleasure in torturing the wretched man cringing before her. Still holding the pistol, she regarded her father with cold and pitiless eyes.

"Can one endure the pangs of hell and still live! I cannot bear it. Why, dear God," he whispered, "must my sin thus follow me? Does repentance mean nothing? Absolve me, and take away this cross."

Seeing that Elena was inexorable, he rose and tottered to his desk. The light of a great resolve was in his face as he wrote a few lines, which, after dating and signing, he carefully sprinkled with sand, and leaving the paper on his desk, stood up.

"I see that you are determined to pursue me to the bitter end; but I will cheat you of your revenge."

"Ah, that you shall not do. I have lived only for this moment. *Dio*, how I have longed for it!"

Father Lamian turned away and shrugged his shoulders. He opened a small drawer of his desk with a key of curious pattern, and took out a silver box. Pressing a hidden spring, the lid moved aside, disclosing a small

phial which contained a brownish fluid of pungent odor. Elena watched him as if fascinated. Next, he took the dagger, which she remembered playing with one day not long ago, and made a minute abrasion on his left wrist, pushing back his sleeve to do so. His daughter noticed that the wound was in the shape of a cross.

"It is a baptism, the second one," he exclaimed, grimly. "Elena, forgive me before we part, for you are right in saying that tonight will separate us forever. If you can say 'Father, forgive,' it would make it easier for me."

"What in heaven's name are you talking about?" cried Elena, leaning forward in considerable consternation. "If you are in earnest, I must try to forgive you, for, after all, you are my father; but I fear I can never forget."

The priest smiled sadly, and bent his head in prayer; then, taking the small bottle, raised it, and it seemed to her he was about to put it to his lips. With a cry, she sprang forward and caught his hand in hers, but he laughed scornfully as the liquid in the bottle was spilled on his wrist, soaking the wound previously made.

"Into Thy hands I commend my——" but a

film passed over his eyes as he spoke, and he suddenly fell forward. He was dead.

With a gasping cry, Elena, horror-stricken, drew her wrap about her. Then, like one in a dream, she stepped slowly backward, her hands stretched out before her, and turning, fled into the night.

XXII

BEPPU rushed from his home as the town-clock was striking nine. He had just had a stormy scene with his mother on the subject of those wretched papers. She only consented to let him leave on condition that he would, without fail, bring back some definite news of their whereabouts.

As he ran up, panting, he caught sight of Miss Webster, walking impatiently up and down the wharf.

"A thousand pardons," he said, and added, apologetically, "I am sorry to be late, but it couldn't be helped. My mother is worried about her papers."

"There is nothing to be anxious about. They will either turn up or we shall hear something connected with them soon."

Her words were intended to be reassuring, but she herself did not feel easy, as her self-reproaches of the night before made her acknowledge more than ever how thoughtlessly she had acted, and wonder as to the result.

"Go first to the Hotel Grande Bretagne," she continued, "I wish to leave a message there."

Martha was a person who did not suffer from nervous apprehension, but having received no word from Elena, she determined that it would be wiser to go and seek her out, discover what she had done with the documents, and even if she gained nothing, she would at least feel more satisfied.

When the landing place was reached, she could hardly wait for the usually unkempt old man to steady the boat with his long hooked stick, but jumped recklessly out and almost ran to the hotel. As she neared it, she lessened her pace and entered the building. She had come along so quickly that she did not notice how few boatmen there were standing about. Those who were there talked excitedly, and pointed up the dusty road along which crowds of people were hurrying.

"Will you find out," she asked the *concierge*, "if the Signora Cantilena can see me? It is early, I know. What? Oh! Miss Webster. I thought you knew me."

"The Signora left for Como an hour ago," was the laconic reply, "but here is a note from her. I thought it better to wait before sending it over to the villa."

"How strange! Gone? It must have been a very sudden decision. I cannot understand it. Was this all she left for me—no larger

package, nothing else, you are quite certain?"

Miss Webster was about to open the note, when loud cries outside attracted her attention, and she asked what the commotion was. The man, a German, did not know, but suggested it might be some religious procession. Seeing Beppo running towards her, she slipped the envelope into her black bag and went to meet him.

"The most wonderful news! There is a report that the priest is dead," he cried.

"Dead! What do you mean?" starting back, horror-stricken.

"Some say he was murdered—others that he killed himself."

"How terrible!" but to herself she added, "How providential!"

"Come," said Beppo, eagerly, "let us hasten on and see if it is really true."

Allowing herself to be persuaded, she followed the boy as best she could, and hurriedly made her way along the road in his wake. As they were passing the Villa Tofana, she stopped, unable to proceed.

"You go on without me," she called out; but the boy did not hear as he rushed on with the others, while Martha turned in at the wicket gate.

On the terrace she met Paul, who looked somewhat pale and anxious.

"Anna has had a very disturbed night. She moaned several times, has only just waked up, and feels rather seedy. What *is* that noise? What on earth has happened?"

"My dear boy, take me up to your studio. I have something to tell you. We shall be alone there, and—give me your arm. I have had a great shock and feel unnerved."

Paul did as he was bid, and, on arriving at the studio, led her to a chair, while he threw open a window, allowing the fresh air to blow in.

"Tell me what has upset you?" he queried, anxiously regarding her as she remained motionless, with closed eyes.

"Ah! it is horrible to think of. I can see the whole picture in imagination."

"What is horrible?"

"Even though I disliked and mistrusted him, I can hardly realize it yet."

"Miss Martha," said Paul, "won't you tell me what you are talking about?"

"Don't you really know? Haven't you heard that—why, the noise, the shouts of people passing—I thought you would have guessed."

"I did hear an unusual disturbance—you

remember I spoke of it—and noticed a crowd of people.”

“Didn’t you see the direction they were taking, and did you not then suspect?”

“What! Good God, you don’t mean—has anything happened to him?”

“He is dead, they say.”

“Dead, dead!” cried Paul, rising and looking fixedly at her. “When did it happen? Tell me what you know.”

“I know nothing, save that he must be dead, for Beppo heard the people hurrying by, shouting various confused rumors.”

“But it must be an accident. I cannot understand it. I feel dazed. I don’t blame you for being upset by such news. Things of that kind are a fearful shock and very distressing.”

“It will be useless for you to try and go there now,” she said, as she saw him preparing to leave the room. “His house and effects are surely in the hands of the authorities by this time.”

“I suppose you are right,” he replied, sitting down again. “Tell me, do you think he was murdered?”

“I can’t say, but I don’t see what motive any one would have, do you? Beppo ran ahead, and, if there is any news, he will come

back and tell us. He finds out things in a mysterious way of his own. Good gracious, can it be possible? But no—why, I had almost forgotten to read my letter. Perhaps it will clear up this mystery. It is from the woman who called herself La Cantilena,” she said, taking it out.

“If she wrote you a letter, she must have left, too. Her departure must have been unmediated. It seems to me it looks suspicious after what you have just told me. But read the letter, it may say something definite, as you suggested. There is no use guessing when there are fearful things happening about us.”

He watched her as she read through its contents and waited.

“Ah, my woman’s intuition was correct! Paul, this is a private letter. I will read some of it to you, but you must promise me never to speak of any of the facts it contains. It might be better, too, that you should say nothing to Anna. I shall tell her what I think necessary.”

“I promise, but go on.”

“Well, listen: ‘I feel as if I had lived years during the night. So many terrible things have happened. Your packet of letters came like a blessing from heaven. I guessed

from them that the priest was my father, and learned for the first time that he had never been married to my poor mother, although she believed he had. The marriage certificate was not genuine, though it was not forged, but the priest who married them had been excommunicated and the whole thing became therefore a mere farce. I was the only child of that ill-assorted union. I made my way to him to say that I was going away and now feared him no longer. I told him I would expose him if he did not let me go, for the influence he previously had over me was at an end. He was really frightened by my words, so I knew then it was all true. He took out a little bottle which he was about to raise to his lips, when I sprang at him, believing it to be poison, and caught his hand. My action upset it, but some of the liquid fell on his wrist. I thought I had saved him, when he suddenly lurched over in the midst of a short prayer—dead. As God is my judge, this is the truth. Dear Miss Webster, in so many ways you have made me think you were my friend that I——’ Well, that is all ; the rest is for my own ear.”

“It is a strange and terrible tale,” commented Paul. “It must have been a weak heart which killed him. She says he did not

touch the poison with his lips. I am surprised to hear that a priest could be secretly married, or even, which is worse, go through the forms of marriage with intent to deceive."

"That incident must have happened long ago, before he became a priest; whatever he was in the past we cannot call him a hypocrite, for according to his lights he was sincere."

"Still, you see that it is unsettling, putting it mildly, to learn that my friend has been guilty of such a crime, for even if his after-life were blameless, the old stigma must remain."

"Yes, I agree with you, but we cannot judge him. Remember he is dead, and gone to stand face to face with his Maker."

"It is sad to feel he died without preparation, no absolution, no——" but a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of Beppo, put an end to his remarks.

"The *padre* was a suicide," announced the boy, excitedly. "A paper found lying on his desk, and signed by him, proved it, and the bottle of poison I heard contained aconite, I think they said. Some of it fell on his wrist where he had wounded himself, and that killed him."

"La Cantilena spoke the truth after all," said Paul, with a strange smile. "I shall not

work to-day—you may have a holiday,” he said to Beppo.

As the lad turned to leave the room, Miss Webster caught him by the arm.

“Tell your mother not to worry about those papers. Try and make her understand that they have proved to be of use to me and have enabled me to save two innocent ones from peril. Tell her Giulio is punished and her cousin avenged. The letters are in safe hands,—they were instruments of destiny and no one will see them or hear of the people who were mentioned in them again. Beg her to forget their existence. Go to her now, for she will be worried.”

“What do you mean by ‘unsettling’?” asked Martha, after a pause. “Are you referring to religion, or do you mean that your work will suffer?”

“Both, I fancy. I feel like a ship without a rudder and you know I am in despair about my picture, now that my model has left me.”

“Because of the model or of the woman? Ah! you were very near making a fool of yourself there.”

“You women call it that, do you? I was fascinated, I suppose, for she was bewitching. It is hard to resist a beautiful creature.”

"It isn't like you to speak slightly of our sex and I don't believe——"

"I am not going to tell tales on myself, so you need not insinuate. It is better to keep women in the dark about such matters."

"How you have changed! Don't you care any longer for your wife? She more than half thinks you have——"

"Good heavens! she can't—she mustn't. How am I ever going to convince her to the contrary?"

"By making love to her—I will help you all I can."

"Please do, and—by Jove, I will! So that is what has been the matter with her lately and I never knew? Miss Martha, I love my wife."

"Then prove it to her. Make her believe that you are unchanged and let the memory of the old days bring you two together. You've been near the vortex and I was afraid you were going to be caught in its death-dealing arms. What do you intend to do about going over to the Roman Church?"

"I hardly know. I have no one to advise me. How does Anna feel about that? I must confess I have been afraid to say anything to her on the subject."

"She is unselfish and wishes you to do what you think best."

"Bless her for that. What do you think I ought to do? I am now of two minds about it."

"I don't wish to say anything: but I can't help thinking that religion is a very important thing. If two married people do not agree on that subject, there may be a possibility of their being separated on others. Here is my advice: take Anna into your heart and try to be sympathetic. Assume an interest in her affairs, and bring her into your life. I am speaking out my mind, because I think you want plain speaking. Incidentally, I may say that I am and always have been a Congregationalist, so my views of other faiths are hardly unprejudiced."

"Still, as I want to know what you think, you must tell me. I am not so easily offended and I am certainly not bigoted."

"Very well, Paul Trefusis, I shall take you at your word. I always was literal and I am still old-fashioned enough to think people mean what they say. Here are my views on the religious question: Roman Catholicism may be likened to a pipe filled with delicious tobacco, whose pungent aroma lulls the senses of the prospective convert to a condition of quasi-nirvana. In this state he or she accepts without question the tenets and teachings to

be inculcated. Such is the picture before the final step is taken and that, I am afraid, is how you stand at present. Later on, when the pipe is placed in one's own mouth, there is a terrible difference ; the flavor is not the same, for there is a bitterness in its essence, a presentiment of what one soon discovers to be its fundamental quality. What is the result? The mental horizon becomes tinged with unrest and one sinks into a slough of moral helplessness, without struggle or volition. It is borne in when too late, that, with every alley closed, escape is impossible,—one is not the servant of the Most High, as has been fondly thought, but the menial of a powerful organization. The final picture is finished !”

“Bravo ! that is the first piece of common-sense I have heard. I shall not become a member of such an organization. I should end by not being able to call my soul my own.”

“Heaven forbid that I should influence you !” she interposed.

“But you are not doing so, really, Miss Webster—I hardly knew what I was doing. Your clever description of what I know to be the true facts of the case has opened my eyes. I was being blinded, but you have cured me. I shall burn my books, as the old fairies used to say.”

"I am glad to hear you speak like that, and only hope you are sincere. It will be better for me to retire from the scene of action, and leave you and Anna to fight this out alone. I shall, therefore, leave for Paris to-morrow, and expect you to drop me a line at the Hotel de l'Empire, where I always stay, and tell me how things turn out."

"But you will see my wife before you go?"

"Of course, and I must tell you something now which I am surprised you never thought of as the only solution—I am talking of your picture. Why not try and induce Anna to sit to you? She would be an ideal 'Spring'."

"Do you think I could manage that? I don't know what I have been thinking of all this time. Why, she is *the* woman for it, and she must be my model."

"I am off now to see her, but I shall not fight your battle for you. I am only going to give her some good advice. You had better wait and see her this afternoon, for then I shall be occupied in collecting, packing, and arranging, as the absent-minded clergyman said to his wife, 'all my rags and travelling bugs'."

"Just as you say, and I wish to thank you for playing the part of a real friend. Anna and I shall not easily forget all you have done."

"But I have done nothing. God has been the only one who has helped you, and, remember, He is the only One who ever can."

Paul sat thinking hard for some time after Miss Webster left, while the room, full of ghosts and old memories, seemed hardly familiar. He lived over rapidly the events of the past month; his meeting with the priest standing out clear and distinct, and a fleeting memory of the beautiful singer occupied his mind. He did not acknowledge that he had been about to take a step which he might have regretted later, nor did the remembrance of a burnt-out passion seem to have left more than a faint scar upon his heart, for the wound was now almost healed. With return to other thoughts, he instinctively grasped the fact that there was something still to be done. He rose, and, removing the covering from his picture, seized the sketch of Elena, which she had pinned in position, and tossed it fiercely into a corner, where it was doomed to lie forgotten for some time, feeling a sense of relief when he had done so.

"That incident is closed," he said aloud, and, taking a chair, he seated himself and stared at the empty space. In imagination he saw it filled with the presence of his wife, the

woman who occupied his heart to overflowing and sighed.

As in fancy the vision of the loving face amplified and grew more real, he found himself analyzing her state of mind. Was she lonely, and did she feel herself neglected? Could it be possible that she thought Art could come between or anything else separate them, when Love with outstretched wings stood by?

"You have been a fool and you never knew it, but as you acknowledge it now there may be a chance for you."

He rose and paced the floor.

There was something still which rankled. What was it? Ah, yes! It was to destroy those books, those accursed pages which had almost been forced down his throat to choke him. There was a small grate in the apartment, and into this he heaped them, applied a match, watching while they burned, nursing the flaming pile as he knelt there, until only a mass of feathery gray ashes remained. That was over.

He began to dread the coming interview, for how would his wife receive his explanations? There was so much to make clear, so many incidents to efface, it was not strange that he felt apprehensive. What would really take

place? Nothing could be worse than this terrible uncertainty. He chafed under the necessity of inaction, but what was he to do until the afternoon? He could not face her yet, as he must if they lunched at the hotel, supposing she was well enough to go out. He asked himself how Father Lamian's death would affect her? It would be a relief, but would it not be a shock as well?

Feeling that he must get away, he caught up his hat and went down to the quay. He would pull along until hungry, and then stop somewhere for luncheon.

Out on the water he breathed more freely, his mind being less disturbed by absorbing thoughts, and for the time he felt calmer. Though it was warm he did not seem aware of it, as he increased his speed, widening the distance between his fragile craft and the shore at every stroke.

What was that distant muffled sound? He looked about him, but could find nothing to account for it. Presently he made out a vast concourse of people moving in an opposite direction from which they had before taken along the road which passed his house. They looked, with their solemn step, like some procession. It must be a funeral, and, God in heaven! that human mass was accompanying the re-

mains of the suicide to his last unhallowed resting-place.

Paul rowed faster, so as to escape as far as possible from this scene. With a straight back and straining muscle, he hastened on, until suddenly a warning shout rang out, but too late to prevent his boat from colliding with a passing electric launch. The impact threw him from his seat, and, falling backwards, he struck his head sharply against the boat's side. Myriad stars danced before his eyes, and then, blackness. He had lost consciousness.

XXIII

WHEN Miss Webster entered Anna's room, she saw that she had lost every vestige of color, while to add to this ghastly effect, large black circles surrounded her eyes and made her look wretchedly ill.

"My dear, I am sorry to hear that you are not feeling well," said she, drawing up a chair and seating herself by the bedside, "as I had wanted a last talk with you before going away."

"What! You are leaving? Oh, you must not go,—my dream, that fearful, haunting smile of the priest's," cried Anna, hysterically, covering her face with her hands; "I cannot shut it out, I shall always see it."

"Supposing I should tell you that you would never see it again?" asked the other, gently.

"What do you mean? Is he gone?"

"Yes. Good news never kills, and I shall tell you all."

During the recital which followed, Martha looked anxiously at Anna, who, however, listened quietly without making any comment until the end.

"How terrible to die by one's own hand!"

He must have suffered horribly to have had courage to commit such a crime. Still, I cannot help thinking that it may be for the best."

"Of course it is for the best. Now I am going to read you part of a note I received this morning from that much misunderstood Elena."

"Have you found out who she is? I always thought her an adventuress. She has ruined both our lives. Paul will never be the same to me again."

"Wait until you hear this and perhaps you will change your mind. Now listen carefully. She says 'You have in so many ways made me think you were my friend that I must try to clear my character, not by explaining things away, for that is how guilty people act, but merely by stating the truth; the other way is weak and puts one in the wrong, even if there is no cause to feel alarmed. I know that Mrs. Trefusis has been and probably is imagining the worst about me. She believes my relations with her husband to have been improper, but before God I swear it, and my word is given with the same solemnity as if uttered under the seal of confession, it is false and without foundation. All the names she doubtless calls me are untruthful, and I ask you to believe, even if she cannot, al-

together inapplicable to me. You might say to her that, when I found I had fallen in love with her husband, I brought the sittings to an abrupt close ; but I feared to sever relations entirely on account of my dread of Father Lamian, under whose instructions I was acting. If I had known his secret, I should not have hesitated to sacrifice myself long ago, for I regret the forced necessity which made me bring distress into the lives of those I shall ever feel the greatest affection for. Now I shall say no more except good-bye,—for we shall never meet again ; but, before I close, I ask you to respect my past, and prevent tales being circulated ; I have my professional life to live, and the mystery of my private affairs must remain inviolate.

“ ‘Accept, Signorina, my sincere and respectful devotion,

“ ‘ELENA MASSI.’ ”

“You believe that?” asked Anna, scornfully.

“I do,” replied Martha, decidedly. “Every word breathes sincerity and seems to be traced with her heart’s blood. She is a very unhappy woman and I pity her, as you should.”

“I wish I could, but I can’t, at least not just yet. You think I am hard, but the idea has

taken too firm a hold to be dislodged so easily."

"You should pray for strength to forget, then, instead of putting yourself up on a pedestal and crying out with a loud voice, 'Thank God, I am not as other men are.' 'I am I' is all very well to shout to the world at rare intervals, but it is a dangerous creed to force down people's throats and try to make them believe infallible. Proper self-respect is all very well, but the modern tendency is to abnormally develop one's individuality and make it more important than anything else. The result is that other equally fundamental factors are lost sight of. Such a condition of affairs is very easy to fall into and the process is so gradual that one hardly knows the danger is there until one is engulfed."

"What other things do you mean to imply?" asked Anna, interested in spite of herself.

"Some slight acquaintance with other people's affairs and lives. The cultivation of sympathy for the foibles of one's friends and the grafting of love with common-sense."

"I have I any more faults you would care to tell me of?" demanded Anna, stiffly.

"Lots, my dear. No one has ever told you of them, which is a distinct pity. It isn't a particle of use to try and stop me now, for I

am too much your friend to permit you to make a little idiot of yourself, as you certainly will if you continue."

Anna sat up very stiffly, but said nothing.

"First of all, you are over-imaginative, too exacting, and morbidly sensitive. You are not actually a coward, but you sit down before an obstacle and cry for some one to take it away, when you ought to be looking out for means and ways to remove it yourself. Lack of executive ability always prevents you from taking the initiative, and you are selfish and obstinate."

"Thank you," said Anna, coldly. "You are brutally frank. Oh, I wish I had your kind of courage, which stops at nothing,—but I haven't."

"But you can develop it," suggested the other. "You are too easily discouraged, or else you don't go the right way about it to succeed."

"Why don't you say I am a fool and be done with it?"

"Because I don't think so. You allow yourself to be carried away by an idea, and then you are surprised that every one else doesn't do what you expect them to do. You say you do not seriously object to your husband becoming a Roman Catholic, yet you

must know it will not bring you more in sympathy with each other."

"I said that because I think it best for Paul to make up his own mind on a subject which concerns him most."

"And why not you, too? Exactly what I said. If he does become a member of another faith, you must not be vexed that his interests are differentiated from yours. Because the priest's influence has been removed, it does not follow that the danger is past. I tell you, Anna, my dear, that your husband needs you just as much now as he ever did, and perhaps more so, for his eyes have been opened."

"In what way, may I ask?"

"In no special one, but often when a man comes to the turning of the ways and receives a shock which sobers him, he stops and sees things through different glasses."

"I don't know that I thoroughly agree with you," answered Anna, "for you are taking men as a class and making them all act the same. You have been more than kind to me, and you may be certain that I can never forget it, but I don't see what you are attempting to do, unless it is to act as a go-between. Paul and I, if we ever make up, must do so by ourselves."

"Exactly what I told him. I made it clear

that I would never fight his battles for him, and I won't. I am giving you the best advice I can, and you refuse to understand me. All I have said you turn into a personal attack."

"Which does not rob it of its sting, however you look at it. You have seen Paul, I suppose? What did he say?"

"I am not an intermediary, and you might think I was trying to influence you, so I had better say nothing."

"No, I shall not. Tell me. I particularly wish to know."

"Would not he be the best person to do that?"

"Perhaps, but I should like to hear your version first."

"So as to be able to trip him up afterwards? Bravo! You would make an excellent diplomat."

"Are you going to tell me or not?"

"Yes—one thing, but only one. He assured me he had decided not to join the Roman Church."

"You believed him? Well, I don't. Paul does not seem to know his own mind lately."

"Yes, I did. We had a very frank talk, and he is not a fool by a long shot, I can tell you."

"All men are very much the same," began Mrs. Trefusis, with a sigh.

"Ah, there you are wrong. Paul is strong, intelligent, and very much in love with you."

"For how long?" inquired Anna, cynically. "He is as changeable as any weathercock, you know."

"That's right—put all the blame on him. You sit up and say 'Love me, I must be loved,' and you don't reflect that words alone are not enough."

"What would you have me do?"

"I would have you prove yourself a woman and not a beautiful doll. The world was not made in a day, and men, being self-absorbed, are not going to hang about a woman unless she shows she is made of flesh and blood."

"Oh, Miss Martha, you are unjust! Do you know you are becoming harder as you grow older. I am afraid you will be an old maid after all."

"Don't try to spare my feelings, I am one already. You needn't be afraid of speaking out. I am too rugged to be offended, but I tell you, my dear Mrs. Trefusis, I understand you very well."

"Do you, though? Well, perhaps so, but I cannot make up my mind until I thresh out the whole matter."

"In which respect you are not very different from the rest of us. I hope you will see Paul

soon. Come, rise and get dressed, and we will go over to lunch, for I must pack later, if I am ever going to start to-morrow. Put on that pretty muslin with the pale-green ribbons you wore the other day, and fluff out your hair more in front. You must not grow careless about your appearance."

"I hope I never shall. I hate to see a woman who is not neat. Lady Adela always has pins just ready to fall out, and her cap is never quite straight."

"Well, let me be your maid, for I want you to look your best. No one must know that you have been worried. By the way, tell me about your dream."

"Oh, it was awful, and I hardly know whether it was a nightmare or a waking vision, for I have no recollection of getting to the place—I was just there." She related her strange experience. "The conversations were too clear for a dream, and yet I doubt whether I was awake. Oh, it was too horrible, and to see Paul drawn down into that foaming, swirling vortex—like a sheep going astray. Oh, I cannot bear to think of it!"

"Yet you say you no longer love your husband?"

"I never said that," replied Anna, quickly. "Love cannot be killed so simply. You have

spoken to me to-day in a way that no one else has ever dared, and although I was shocked at first, and more than surprised, yet now I don't feel angry. You have sown seeds of happiness in my heart,—the only question is whether they will ever come up."

Anna rose and disappeared into her dressing-room.

"A cold bath is so bracing," she said, returning later. "I feel like a new woman. My dress is in that closet. I must find those russet slippers. Where did I put them?"

"What a sweet frock, and how becoming it is! You don't mean to say you trimmed that hat? You are a magician."

"Come, let us go out on the terrace. It is shady there at this hour."

When they reached it, Miss Webster seated herself, while Mrs. Trefusis walked restlessly up and down. Suddenly she paused before her companion.

"All that you told me is true," she said, quickly. "I have been very foolish and am much to blame; yet what could I have done? You yourself acknowledged that you could do nothing against the priest. By the way, what was his secret?"

"My dear girl, why go over the old ground. Let the dead bury its dead. It is no use

crying over spilt milk. If it weren't for your pride, I would feel no anxiety, but it makes you obstinate. Men, you know, cannot understand women when they are like that. They are not patient, and cannot bear as much as we have to."

"Yes, you are perfectly right," she acknowledged, "but I must have a talk with Paul, first, before I make up my mind what to do. I wish to see how he looks, hear what he says, and then I shall know. Of course, I suppose I do love him, but I shall not be sure until he dispels these clouds of doubt and unhappiness, and not before shall I tell him so."

"Anna, you are a strange creature! If I were your husband I should feel inclined to beat you. You are so unnecessarily complex. You make trouble when you might so easily avoid it."

"I don't agree with you. I am too impatient to stand by and suffer when by running away I can escape it more easily."

"You are like a nervous, high-strung filly, beautiful and sleek. Your intelligence is there, but you need a good strong hand over you, and it should belong to your master."

"Yes, that is true."

"And the mistake of years has been that Paul has either not cared to exercise his pre-

rogative or didn't feel the necessity for so doing," pursued Miss Webster.

"Perhaps indifference on his part would suggest your meaning more decidedly."

"No, I wouldn't call it that," replied Miss Webster, looking out over the lake. "When a man is absorbed in his work, I would not call him indifferent."

"Not to what he is doing, certainly."

"But to you?—which is what I suppose you mean me to read between the lines. My dear, it is hard to make you see the truth. You married an artist who loves and adores the very ground you walk on. This is not conjecture, but a fact,—very well, accept it or not, as you like. There are times in that man's life when he is lost in dreams; it has been during some of these artistic moments that your soul has chosen to cry out to his, and you were surprised that he repulsed and paid no attention to you. I cannot see why you, who have an artistic temperament also, did not realize your mistake."

"You are putting all the blame on one side, and that hardly seems just."

"What will you gain by opening out the whole question? Marriage, even in the case of two people such as you are, must be a condition of give and take. I don't consider Paul

has been blameless. On the contrary, I told him very plainly he was not. Every one has his faults, but those very infirmities are part of his nature, and having once accepted them with the person, we cannot turn around and object to his having them. It is better to try and forget, or at least not to insist on giving them too great an importance."

"'With all thy faults, I love thee still,'" quoted Anna, bitterly. "You advise me to make the best of a bad bargain?"

"If you are as pig-headed with your husband as you are with me now, I do not envy him. It will be like making love to a statue."

"But Galatea became human," interposed Mrs. Trefusis.

"Yes, and caused no end of trouble. What is that? Don't you hear a noise in the direction of the village? I thought Bellagio was a quiet place. Why, a crowd of people is coming along the road," said Martha, rising and shading her eyes from the sun with her hand, "and they are on their way here, I do believe. What can it mean?"

She could soon make out a litter borne by several people, and as they came nearer she saw that the figure of a man lay motionless on it. Turning to Anna, who had also risen, she endeavored to lead her gently indoors, but the

who had already been and is quietly pushed her companion away, rigidly looking out at the approaching catastrophe with fixed, tense eyes looking herself back against the landscape. Still later, in a flash, she saw them move along the terrace and after a few words with Martin understood that two men tenderly bore her husband into the house, while the rest silently moved away. She seemed stunned, but after a few minutes she passed her hand over her brow, and with a low cry hurried into the villa.

The reaction had set in, and it was she herself who gave the necessary directions, sitting by Paul's side waiting for the doctor to arrive.

Some time later when he entered the room where Paul lay he greeted the silent woman, who merely responded by an inquiring look. He made his examination and turned to her.

"No bones broken. I am told he fell back in his boat and struck his head; he is merely stunned. He will wake later. If he seems natural and composed, I am sure a day or so of rest will put him right again. If he wanders, when consciousness returns, send for me; otherwise, I should advise perfect quiet; and put cold compresses on that bruise. Nothing else is necessary. Above all, you must not worry, for if he is lucid when he wakes, it is essential

that he sees the face he loves. That will be the best medicine. Good-day ; I will look in to-morrow."

Anna hardly noticed his departure ; she remained apparently without emotion by her husband's side. Miss Webster looked in for a moment, kissed her softly, and left. Later on, when there was a flutter of the injured man's eyelids and then a faint return of color to the white face, Mrs. Trefusis bent slightly forward and watched intently for consciousness to become complete.

Paul opened his eyes slowly, and looked at his wife. He did not say anything at first ; he seemed puzzled.

"Anna, is it really you ? What has happened ? I must have been hurt, I think. My head aches frightfully."

"It is all right, dear ; you had a little accident," she replied, softly, resting her hand tenderly on his forehead ; "but sleep now, and you will be all right when you wake. I will be here."

She saw him relax, heard his breathing become natural and easy, then, leaning back in her chair, she sighed deeply, and quietly swooned away.

XXIV

FLEECY clouds hid the sun, and the scene was gray with a placid stillness. A light breeze blew in fitful puffs, and the heavy atmosphere made Paul imagine a cloak of sadness was being drawn slowly about him which would eventually shut out hope, and finally brightness, from his life.

During the two days he had been ill his wife nursed him with care and faithfulness, bathing his wounded head and in many ways trying to make the time pass quickly. During that period he had not been able to fathom her thoughts as he watched her move about his room with tireless energy, and at first he had been too weak to make the effort. When feeling stronger, he followed her with anxious eyes, and tried unsuccessfully to enter into conversation ; his courage always oozed when the words were ready to fall from his lips. It was not that she repelled him or showed any coldness in her manner, but there was an indefinable something raising a barrier between them, which, much as he wished, he could not overcome, nor could he force himself to speak out and bring matters to an issue. As he

paced slowly up and down the stone terrace, he determined that he must and would find an opportunity to do so that day. The present condition of affairs was like a state of armed neutrality; the uncertainty of it was unendurable.

Before coming downstairs he had listened at the door of her room, but, hearing no sound, feared to go in, as she usually took a nap at that hour. She wrote letters afterwards, he knew, and about four, came down to walk on the terrace or play on her piano before going over to the hotel for tea. Perhaps he would not have long to wait, for at this moment the half-hour after three chimed from the church bell in the village, so he resumed his walk, stopping from time to time to look out over the lake or at the hazy mountains.

Several chords sounded in the room behind him, and he knew that they came from the touch of his wife's fingers, so without hesitation he turned and made his way to her. She looked up inquiringly as he entered, but before she could frame a question he said,—

“Anna, I wish to speak with you.”

She wheeled slowly round, and resting one hand on the music-rack, regarded her husband fixedly for a moment, then dropping her eyes, prepared to listen to what he had to say. She

said nothing. He must plead his cause in his own way, unaided. How her heart was beating !

Why had Miss Webster been in such a hurry to leave, only waiting to see if Paul were out of danger, when she might have been of assistance if she had stayed on ? Mrs. Trefusis was anxious to be fair to her husband and just with herself, but alone she could not make up her mind to take the initiative.

She confessed to herself unwillingly that Paul's accident had shocked her into momentary tenderness, and it had been a relief to minister to his needs, as it took her out of herself. As she saw him standing before her and looking very much as usual, outward indifference returned, and she realized that she had drifted back, like Pharaoh of old, to former indecision. Would Martha have called this obstinacy ? She did not stop to consider the real state of her affection for him ; she must first hear what he had to say, and then would know how it was to be.

Paul remained standing, but did not speak at once, for his wife's unsympathetic attitude made him pause. He knew it was essential for him not to lose his temper if he wished to gain any advantage, and walked to the window to compose himself. Looking round, he saw

she was waiting for him to speak. He could expect no assistance from his wife, for she was most decidedly not going to give him any, that was evident.

"How long is this to go on?" he asked.

"To go on—this?" answered Anna, puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know very well what I mean," he retorted, coolly. "How much of this behavior do you think I am going to endure?"

"It remains for you to say."

"I must confess I don't understand. I am completely in the dark. Will you be good enough to enlighten me?"

"Yes," she replied, with determination, "I will, since you wish it. During the first years we were married, you were all tenderness, and showed me plainly that you loved me. It is better to tell you what I think, instead of repressing myself and feeling that I have a canker-worm gnawing at my heart. It was only a few years ago that you changed, not suddenly, but gradually, so that I was hardly aware of the difference. The impression that you were beginning to lose interest became at last a certainty, and I was distressed, but not hopeless, about being able to restore the former state of affairs."

"Go on," he said, as she paused.

"Then, as I had no one to advise and prevent me from falling into error, I thought you no longer loved me. You began to put art first, and left me to come along by myself as best I might."

"My darling," broke in Paul, "I am sorry, which is all I can say, but that alone will not mend matters, I am afraid."

"No, it will not," she replied, coldly, "but listen to me a little longer. Things became worse when you met the priest. I hated him from the very first."

"Ah, but he is dead, and we are no longer under his influence, so that question is settled and done with forever. I shall never become a Roman Catholic. It is finished. What! You won't believe me?"

"I wish I could," answered Anna, sadly. "Ah, if you were really sincere, it would make all the difference in the world to me, but you are so changeable, lately, I hardly recognize you as the same man, and I don't know what to think."

"You are at liberty to think what you choose, and I am not going down on my knees to make you believe the truth."

Paul spoke quietly, but firmly, and his wife, impressed by the latent force in his tone, believed him, but her obstinacy would not permit her to admit it. However, there was no use

in continuing, for another matter still rankled in her mind, which she was certain he would not be able to dislodge so easily. If that wretched subject would only disappear, it would not be impossible to forgive him, but she could not do so until he cleared himself of that stigma. She hardly knew how to begin what was so distasteful and repulsive to her, and yet she could not utterly pass it by. The situation must be faced, and the sooner the better. How would Paul ever be able to prove to her that he had always been true? Why, she asked herself, bitterly, had that woman ever come into their lives? It was all very well for her to have attempted to protect her good name, but her bare word did not carry any weight and, unsupported, was not sufficient. Paul, too, might assert his innocence in the strongest terms, as he doubtless would, but alone this would not convince her of the truth; she needed more than that. What would her husband do?—for it would be impossible for him to find evidence which could in any way carry conviction home to her. What *would* he say? The woman had gone, but had she left her innocence? Could Paul come to her free from the stain of sin?

“Paul,” she stammered, “the singing woman—what of her?”

"Don't you see how wretchedly out of the question it is to discuss such things with you, Anna? An incident of that kind is too terrible to consider, still more to talk about. If I told you the truth, you would not believe me, and I will not condescend to swear I am innocent. I leave it to you to accept me or not, as your better judgment dictates."

"But she said she loved you," persisted Anna, "and she talked to me so knowingly about love that I feel sure she would not let conscience or *les convenances* deter her from committing any crime, if only her desires could be gratified."

"All you say is but too true, and I am hopeless of ever being able to make you believe in me. You have this ugly idea too firmly fixed, and how can I change your opinion of me?"

"Still, that does not prevent you from trying," she murmured. "If you only could make me see with your spectacles, I should be able to forget the past, and we would return to those happy days of long ago."

The wistfulness in her tone and the desire he read in it to be won over, made him think it might be worth while to try. She was not entirely reasonable, but what she had just said aroused his lagging ambition to try and bring even the impossible to pass.

"Those days I have never forgotten," he said, earnestly. "Time cannot change the memory of them, and although you thought they had faded from my heart, indeed they have not ; nevertheless, you must confess that art is absorbing, much more even than you realize. I have seen you lose yourself completely in your music, so you must bear with me. Perhaps I had yielded too much to the whims of that fickle mistress, and wandered too far in fancy from you ; for that I am sorry, but can't you make allowances for me ?"

"I understand all that, Paul, but you have not explained why you deceived me."

"I am coming to that," he answered, softly. "You, who are a woman, cannot know what a man's feelings are."

"But I do," she insisted. "Only men make the mistake of forgetting that they are not the only ones who are subjected to temptation. Why should you be pardoned, and not me, I ask ? It's an unjust world which discriminates so unfairly."

"Yes, the world is very complex, but how can we set ourselves up as its judges. I am not a fatalist, but some things are, because they have always been."

"You are not very progressive. Don't you ever wish to change existing conditions if they

are bad? You have developed a very lenient view since you have lived abroad, and your ideas on a great many subjects are peculiar."

"One must rub shoulders with a great many people during the days and weeks of existence."

"Which is no excuse for carrying their moral filth on the hem of your garment," she retorted.

"Anna," he cried, "do not make it harder for me. Martha Webster told me I should have to win you all over again, but I had no idea how exceedingly difficult it would be. Don't you love me any longer?"

"How can I answer you until you first drive away that ugly spectre of suspicion?"

"That is what I have been trying to do, by appealing to the larger side of your nature. I had hoped that a residence in a wider sphere would have broadened your views, but your nature is too narrow for that."

"Which, in a few words, means that whatever you do should be pardoned because it is the way of your world. I am not so easily gulled as that."

"Anna, can't you look at this from any other point of view? Try to see it from mine."

"I can only do so from the coign of right, that is what my religion has taught me, and I cannot consent to recede from my position

of outraged wife until you show me I have wronged you."

"Do you really believe that I have deceived you? Oh, how absurd and unfair you are! What proof have you?"

"Proof is not always necessary. All I can say is that I believe it."

"Then you are wrong. I tell you I did kiss the woman, and held her in my arms, and I think even now it was excusable. I acknowledge it was weak; however, I can assure you it went no further, but I regret it."

"Can you tell me honestly that that was all? Oh, if I could only believe you!"

"If you loved me, as I thought you did, you would not even think such things of me."

"You have given me cause to be jealous, and it is not surprising that I have felt it."

"I see your stand-point, but under the circumstances I don't feel the justice of it, especially when I swear to you——"

"Swear not at all," she quoted, "and don't make the mistake of protesting too much,—it won't strengthen your position."

"Don't flatter yourself that I am going to humble myself to you. You will have to unbend a little yourself first."

"And that I will never do!" she answered, flushing angrily.

"Very well," answered Paul. "Have your own way, but don't blame me when you come to your senses. I tell you that I love you, and am willing to meet you half way, but you won't listen. Curse your vacillation and obstinacy! Now, I *will* have an answer to my question. I am your husband, and I demand it. Am I guilty, or not? I will give you just five minutes to think it over, and then, if you say 'no,' all will be well, but if your answer is 'yes,' I leave you forever."

Paul turned away, while Anna looked at him in amazement.

What was she to believe? He spoke like an innocent man, and he might be. If he had been guilty he could not have discussed the matter so calmly with her, and he would certainly have lost his temper long before. What if the whole thing had been a hideous mistake and she admitted it, would he forgive her? He had changed suddenly from one who pleads to the master who dictates. He must be very sure of himself to do that. Was she really obstinate, as Martha bluntly told her, and was this fault going to ruin the happiness her nature craved? Paul had insisted on a definite answer. She caught her breath as she lifted her eyes and glanced at him standing by the window. How forbidding he looked.

There was no sympathy or yielding to be expected from that stern profile.

"Paul," she said, slowly but with determination, "I have been wrong, dreadfully wrong. Help me to forget."

He smiled at her, but could not speak at once, for his heart was too full of joy.

"Anna, my darling wife, we have both been terribly at fault. It has been like some hideous nightmare. Thank God! it is past and done with," he exclaimed, brokenly. He took her in his arms, and she murmured happily,—

"I do love you, dear. Perhaps this had to be, and will help us to understand each other. We cannot change, and it was 'for better, for worse,' you know. Paul, tell me again that you love me. Oh, I am so, so happy."

"And yet you are weeping," he whispered, kissing her tenderly.

"But it is for joy," she replied, smiling through her tears. "Everything seems unreal, like a scene in a play, except that there is no curtain to fall at the end, for I shall always love you. On the stage I feel the situation is temporary, but with us it is eternal."

"God grant it!" he said, reverently.

Anna disengaged herself and walked to the mirror.

"What a fright I look!" she exclaimed.

"It's ridiculous at our time of life to sit holding hands like lovers."

"And yet, that is just what we are."

"Paul, how foolish you are!" but her look belied her words.

He did not reply, but glanced at his wife as if there were something he still wished to say, but about which he could not make up his mind to speak.

"Anna," he blurted out at last, "I want you for my model. You are really the only woman who can represent my idea of Spring. I was mad not to have thought of you before."

"If you really wish it, I will. Let us begin at once,—but don't look at me in that sentimental way, it embarrasses me."

As she spoke she stepped to the door, and pausing for her husband to join her, a shaft of light shone down from the window above and bathed her in its glory, her hair resplendent like an aureole on the head of a madonna.

"Come," she said, turning, "come to our workshop, for we will share it in future."

Paul looked at his wife glancing back over her shoulder at him, and hailed the appearance of the sun at this opportune moment as an omen of happiness.

Then together they went out into the golden light of a new life.

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